From Oedipus Complex to Oedipal Complexity: Reconfiguring (Pardon the Expression) the Negative Oedipus Complex and the Disowned Erotics of Disowned Sexualities

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Reconfiguring (Pardon the Expression) the Negative
Oedipus Complex and the Disowned Erotics of Disowned Sexualities

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This paper proposes a contemporary rendering of the Oedipus Complex as key to understanding an individual’s unique erotic signature. Conceived in terms of its complexity as opposed to a fixed and rigid complex and ridded of its heteronormative biases, Oedipal complexity becomes a royal road to unlocking erotic inhibitions and potentiating sensual expansiveness. The theory is rooted in a multiple self state model of mind with an emphasis on conflicting systems of early internalized object relations. Two extended clinical examples are offered in an attempt to further explicate this point of view.

This past year, Ted, my 37-year-old gay male patient, Ted who tells me that he is now gay, has always been gay, knew he was gay at six and never questioned his sexuality, fell in love with and married Debra. “Beats the crap out of me,” Ted tells me, sitting there grinning sheepishly but euphorically, deeply in love, sensually on fire. “So much for certainty.” This past year, three, count them three, of my adult women patients, all bright, high-functioning, self-reflective women, each independently describes climbing into bed with her aging mother, holding her mother’s body close to hers, breasts pressed against breasts, sensing it physically, viscerally, and with deep sensual and erotic satisfaction. This past year my patient Andrea relates a dream in which she and I are lying face-to-face in the most tender and sensual embrace while the labia of both our vaginas form lips that kiss passionately. This dream comes on the heels of a deeply satisfying, intensely sensual sexual night of lovemaking between Andrea and her husband. This past year my patient Robert holds his infant son and is suddenly overwhelmed with thoughts of stroking and then sucking his young baby’s penis. Self-described as “one of those guys who never had a homosexual thought in his life,” Robert is blindsided and flooded with anxiety. He tries to make love to his wife but can’t get an erection. This past year I sit in front of my computer and try to write a paper on love, desire, and passion, its varieties, enigmas, and disruptions. And yet, this past year I feel that I understand sexuality and erotic desire less clearly than ever before. I am haunted by Ted, who, sitting opposite me on the day after he returns from his honeymoon with Debra, claiming to be more in love, more bewitched, more on fire than ever before, chuckles.
gleefully and with mischievous abandon and delight throws down this gauntlet. “I consider myself fortunate,” Ted tells me. “. . . I only have to live my life. . . . I pay you to try and make some sense out of it!!” Hopefully none of you are reading this paper in order to find clarity.

There must, I think, be a beginning. It comforts me. And so I have come to believe that there is in each of us a potential psychic space, a space of oscillating and elusive boundaries, a space that bridges body and mind, fantasy and reality, conscious and unconscious, self and other. I think of it as a space in which creative imagination and shameful inhibition exist in an ongoing duel for primacy, a place in which we can feel most completely our selves, or a space in which we can lose ourselves most completely. I speak of that unique psychic space in which desire is born, in which sensual delights are first experienced, a space in which such desire and sensuality can be held and ultimately transformed into an erotic, interpenetrating, mutual mind/body melding with other, specifically chosen human beings. Within this space we experience our bodies, our physical desires, our patterns of arousal and quiescence, and we begin to signify that experience in a language that, although pitifully inadequate to capture the complexity, fluidity, and nuance of sensual/erotic desire, is the only system we have to symbolize our complex physiological experiences and embody that language in actual felt experience. This task occurs in relation to others—always in relation—parts of selves, fantasies of self, experiences of self in connection with others, others who are also whole, partial, or imaginary.

As psychoanalysts we have been trained to think about sexuality as a more or less linear developmental process. Sexuality, we have been told, is oedipal or preoedipal, oedipal or post-oedipal, genital or pregenital; it moves from mouth to anus to penis and vagina. It begins in early attachment experience around the exchange of bodily fluids, yet we tend to distinguish these early “maternal erotic” experiences (Wrye & Welles, 1994) from erotic experience proper as if they are clearly demarcated and as if one leads on naturally to the other. However, in the context of relational psychoanalysis with its emphasis on multiple self/other organizations and the added dimension of complexity theory with its emphasis on the profound impact of the tiniest nuances of developmental variability, it seems clear that we must abandon such attempts to linearize developmental process. And it would seem, that sexuality, perhaps more than any other single developmental line, would powerfully resist this kind of linear, stepwise model. In using chaos theory to explicate what she terms the “soft assembly of gender,” Adrienne Harris (2005) suggested that we “unyoke or at least unsolder gender from body and desire” (p. 206). She stated,

If we place on an equal plane of possibility negative and positive oedipal identifications, multiple and complex characterizations of parental objects and self objects, and if we refuse to genderize or normalize active and passive sexual aims, many possible forms of sexuality appear. (p. 207)

In this paper, I would like to take up the challenge of unyoking body and desires specifically, emphasizing the endless complexity and infinite variability of our erotic selves. My aim is to attempt to reconceptualize positive and negative oedipal configurations of identification and counteridentification, not as specific phases of childhood sexual development but as a lifelong struggle to sustain erotic, romantic, sexual attachments across the life cycle. Such a “developmental line,” to borrow Anna Freud’s concept, might begin with the nursing couple of infancy or with the diaper change that becomes a playful tickle, a parent’s head blowing delicious bubbles into the fat belly of a delighted wriggling baby; wending its way through the more traditional forms of childhood sexual development, but continuing through the trials and tribulations of adult love, and never failing to take into account an openness to erotic surprise that can often accompany
the sexual “recoupling” of later life relationships. I disagree strongly with those who believe (Fonagy & Target, 2004) that attachment and sexuality evolve within different developmental lines. If “self,” as I have always chosen to think of it, is a kaleidoscope of ever-shifting self/other organizations, then we can presume that all such “self states,” within this kaleidoscopic patterning of identifications and counteridentifications, contain an erotic or potentially antierotic component with conscious, preconscious, and unconscious dimensions. Such an erotic dimension has the capacity to strengthen certain dyadic and triadic constellations of attachment and connection, or it can become the tornado whose dangerous winds disrupt and disorganize ongoing patterns of connection, creating new patterns, odd combinations, idiosyncratic associations, and disruptive or disintegrative yearnings and allure.

As children we learn to ride the waves of our passions, maximizing their potential to create moments of peak cohesion and experiences of self authenticity; while minimizing the impact of their disintegrative and destructive forces. In an earlier paper, (Davies, 2006) I attempted to explore the interface of what I termed the “erotics of darkness” and the “erotics of light,” the ongoing cyclical interface of and tension between periods of intense sexual arousal and periods of orgasmic release and surrender. I suggested that two separate sets of self/other organizations developed—one in relation to the more traditional Fairbairnian “bad exciting object, who tempts and arouses without satisfying, and an equally significant but more undertheorized “good exciting object,” the object who satisfies, soothes, and brings intense longing to climax or fulfillment. I hypothesized that it was the slowly accruing development, from infancy on, of the capacity for what I termed “pleasurable anticipation,” that is, the capacity to hold, sustain, and ultimately enjoy periods of intense sexual arousal without the promise of immediate satisfaction and release and without the threatened internal self disorganization that such unsatisfied mounting tension might engender, that ultimately created a bridge between these two separate self/other organizations. And, I suggested ultimately, that it was the process of creating erotic psychic fantasy that bridged these two separate systems containing the aggression that was experienced in relation to the bad exciting self system, modulating it with the good, and incorporating it into an erotic mind/body synergy much in keeping with Loewald’s (1988) definition of sublimation as “passion transformed.”

In the present paper, I want to explore a similarly bifurcated system of erotic object relations, one that like the erotics of darkness and light tends to defy early integration and lend interesting and clinically significant texture and nuance to the tapestry of our erotic imaginations. In this context I return to my earlier investment in reformulating from within a relational perspective the centrality of the child’s early Oedipus complex (Davies, 1998, 2003) as I attempt to explore the fundamentally bisexual texture of our erotic imaginations, superimposing and layering this inherently and irreducibly bisexual erotic matrix onto the other systems just described. In essence, I am returning to Freud’s early observation that human beings are all essentially bisexual, and attempting along with others (see Aron, 1995; Chodorow, 1978, 1994) to radicalize this statement by delinearizing it and removing from it any normative developmental template. In such a way I hope to adapt my kaleidoscope of dynamically interacting self/other configurations into a somewhat different kaleidoscope of dynamically interacting erotic self other paradigms, which morph in and out of sexual fantasy, imagination, and action. An increasingly complex, multilayered kaleidoscopic system of fantasies, fantasies that originate in both homoerotic and heteroerotic self/other organizations of arousal and quiescence, fantasies that are orgasmic and self-regulating, fantasies that unite self with the significant others and part others of erotic experience. Let me stress, then,
from the outset, that in this paper I am not interested in the sex of one’s partner or fantasied partner, in describing fantasies as homoerotic or heteroerotic. What I am emphasizing in this homo/hetero distinction is the dyadic and triadic configuration of the relational organization in which certain aspects of erotic imagination first arise. Did certain fantasies first occur and elaborate themselves in relation to same-sex or other-sex individuals (see footnote 2 about the role of transsexual fantasy and experience).

I ask you all to keep in mind that I have, in earlier writings (Davies, 1998, 2003, 2013), attempted to shift our understanding of the Oedipus Complex away from one that employs this theoretical construct as the foundation for drive theories and the breeding ground for oppressively heteronormative theories of sexual object choice, toward a more contemporary rendering that views the shifting erotic triangles of the Oedipal situation as holding the fate of our capacity for idealizing romantic love, as well as our ability to transform such idealized love into one that is more mutual, more interpenetrating, more resilient over time. Within this model we are all oedipal winners and oedipal losers; we experience moments of erotic and romantic power and triumph, as well as crushing experiences of erotic and romantic defeat, even humiliation. It is the balance between triumph and defeat, the holding of an optimal tension between the two as we move amidst the multiple significant objects of childhood, that ultimately gives structure and meaning to our erotic, romantic love relations. Imagine, if you will, triangle upon triangle, layers of triangles, son with mother and father, son with two fathers or two mothers, son with father and grandfather, son with grandfather and grandmother, daughter with mother and father, daughter with two mothers or two fathers. The possible combinations seem endless. Now imagine that each point of each triangle is itself a unique amalgam of just as many multiply organized experiences, an infinite regress of triangular, fluid and ever-shifting sensual, erotic, and romantic experiences, which give texture, depth, and visceral complexity to the lovers we seek and find, the lovers we can and cannot be, the sensuality and erotics we can and cannot create. Ultimately, I believe, it is not sexual object choice that is determined by our emergence from the idealized and idealizing constraints of such oedipal triangles but our capacity, regardless of object choice, to sustain passion and eros in our most intimate relationships, to continue to desire that which we can’t possess, nothing short of our fate as lovers and beloveds over a lifetime.

But the Oedipus Complex minus such “complexity” has been something of an endangered species within contemporary psychoanalysis. Let us recall for the moment that originally Freud posited a “positive Oedipus complex” in which there was an erotic tie to the opposite-sex parent and a competitive hostile tie to the same-sex parent viewed as an intrusive interloper into the child’s erotic conquest, as well as a “negative” Oedipus complex in which there developed an erotic tie to the same-sex parent and a competitive hostile tie to the opposite-sex parent. In such a way Freud created a theoretical space for what he believed to be a universal bisexuality. For Freud, however, bisexuality was only a developmentally universal phenomenon, with the negative oedipal, the homoerotic aspect of early sexuality, presumably outgrown. Ultimately, Freud believed that a heterosexual organization in which the positive Oedipus replaced the negative version was the preferred and “healthier” outcome. Even the terms positive and negative

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1From this point on I refer only to homoerotic and heteroerotic dimensions of erotic fantasy life. Although I do not wish to ignore or minimize the multidimensional imaginative potentials of trans fantasy, I have not personally worked with enough trans individuals to try to responsibly apply the thesis of my paper to their experiences. I look forward to a future time and future papers in which that might be possible either for me or for others.
From Oedipus Complex to Oedipal Complexity

bespoke his developmental and value-laden struggle. Herein lies the raison d’être for the passionate extradition of the entire “negative oedipal” concept, what I am calling the “pardon the expression” negative oedipal concept, by more contemporary psychoanalysts— extradition to what Stephen Mitchell once referred to as the “gulag” of oppressive, outdated, presumptively normative psychoanalytic concepts.

My point in this paper is to try to halt this wholesale extradition of the oedipal and, by reconfiguring its allegedly positive and negative dimensions into truly universal and dialectically related systems of object relations that move in and out of positions as foregrounded and backgrounded clinical phenomena, restore its status as a treasure trove of clinical understanding. Let us begin with the presumption that for every child there are both heteroerotic and homoerotic systems of object relations—systems of significant self/other organization, matrices of complexly interacting bisexual identifications and counteridentifications that inform and sustain erotic imagination regardless of developing object choice. Let me suggest, in this regard, that every child develops what I call a primary and secondary oedipal configuration of significant self other experience. For the child in the process of developing a primarily homosexual orientation, the primary oedipal configuration will stress erotic experiences of self in relation to same-sex parents and significant others while the secondary oedipal configuration will capture the erotic self experiences of this child in relation to parents and significant others of the other sex. Likewise for the child developing a primarily heterosexual orientation, the primary Oedipus will involve the erotic experiences of self in relation to other-sex parents and significant others of the other sex. Likewise for the child developing a primarily heterosexual orientation, the primary Oedipus will involve the erotic experiences of self in relation to other-sex parents and significant others with the secondary form involving same-sex erotic experiences.

Let us presume as well that neither of these systems of self/other erotic organization are outgrown, and that each will play a significant role in the texture, quality, and resilience of desire and ongoing erotic experience—multiple, layered systems of erotic imagination, not necessarily directly relevant to sexual orientation but deeply encoded within self other systems of homoerotic and heteroerotic connection. In this paper, I emphasize the terms homoerotic and heteroerotic to highlight certain kinds of sensual bodily experiences and erotic fantasies that emerge in relation to same-sex and other-sex partners or imaginary partners rather than the politicized and dichotomous self definitions, connoted by the more typical homosexual/heterosexual binary. Although for most people, either the homoerotic or the heteroerotic will be highlighted as a predominant sexual orientation emerges, the secondary constellation will play a significant role in understanding the potential breadth and depth of this experience, and both organizations of experience will contribute to the uniquely individual erotic signature of each individual. In essence, I am encouraging a reconsideration of Butler’s (1995) “gender melancholia” and attempting that we look at the split-off and unmourned erotic dimensions in all of us. If we presume that multiple homoerotic and heteroerotic constellations do indeed occur universally, not as an early precursor to some ultimate sexual orientation but as an “at times integrated, at times split off” foundation for all later erotic experience regardless of sexual object choice, then we have constructed a system that conceptualizes and allows for an erotic development of infinite variety, complexity, and outcome. Oedipal complexity, so rendered, becomes a densely layered labyrinth of erotic and romantic relational matrices, a system of thought eloquently suited to capturing the virtually symphonic layering of sexualities engaged in any erotic moment.

I presume in this model that both primary and secondary oedipal configurations are essential to a fully robust and resilient erotic experience regardless of sexual orientation and that these organizations will move in and out of background and foreground positions within an ever-shifting
erotic context each time the sensual/erotic/sexual kaleidoscope turns. Individual variation within these overarching organizations can be infinite, as each child struggles to construct a more or less fluid system of erotic selves in relation to erotic others, depending on the uniquely gendered qualities, acceptable and unacceptable, of the particular others who have crossed his or her path. That which is deemed acceptable within the complex identificatory system will form the patterns of erotic involvement, homoerotic and heteroerotic, fantasied and actual, that are organizationally concordant with the qualities, traits, and attributes of significant attachment figures, those qualities that come to be more conscious, more recurring, more conflict free. Those forms of erotic fantasy and engagement tinged with shame, humiliation, rejection, or overstimulation will come to represent patterns of identification and counteridentification that are more organizationally discordant, those that resist formulation and symbolization, constructing an unconscious substrate to the more symptomatic, inhibited, failures of desire and erotic responsiveness. Both the primary and secondary oedipal configurations, as I have described them, will contain conscious and unconscious, concordant and discordant relational bonds of attachment and dissociation, although I do presume that clinically those aspects of erotic life, encoded within secondary oedipal configurations, be they homoerotic for the heterosexual or heteroerotic for the homosexual, are likely to be more conflictual, and more subject, therefore, to repression or projective evacuation. As such they are prone to be more unavailable to erotic imagination and sexual fantasy.

It is somewhat difficult to provide clinical examples to reflect something one believes to have infinite variety. However, let me offer two clinical examples that, do, at the very least, illustrate something of the foreground/background tension in what I am calling primary and secondary oedipal configurations as they emerge in clinical process.

Sam was 32 years old when he entered analysis. He was a medical researcher in cellular biology at a large New York teaching hospital. Intense, brilliant, challenging, Sam seemed always just a bit angry at the world and at what the world demanded of him in any given moment. Sam’s piercing blue eyes penetrated deeply in a manner difficult to describe. Not quite paranoid or accusing, but somewhere beyond inquisitive; laser-like in their acuity and capacity to cut through layers of potential self-deception or defensive avoidance and obfuscation. In the emerging transference/countertransference mix those eyes demanded a response of at least equal force and acuity; surgical, precise, and unsentimentally expedient. He wanted me to see him, and to see him clearly, but it was equally clear that he was not yet ready to be touched. And Sam was also frightened. From the beginning I felt locked in his gaze, afraid to break eye contact, afraid almost to blink. But he seemed to hold me there, to “keep an eye on me,” to know at all times where I was and what I was up to.

Sam was the kind of patient whom relational analysts rarely write about, a patient who had no interest in tangling himself up in his therapist’s subjectivity. He wanted to be known with an almost brutal honesty, but he clearly had no interest in knowing me or in even feeling my personal presence. “Ya gotta be honest with me,” Sam told me early in that first session. “I have no time for pretty words, and I don’t want you to necessarily make me feel good. I know this analysis thing is hard and it’s gonna hurt and I’m ready for it. I don’t want you to baby me or soften things up. I’m a scientist. Just let me have it, call it the way you see it . . . science not poetry.”

Emerging in Sam’s earliest comments was a sense of self that was scientific, adult, hard, brutally honest and willing to suffer pain for the sake of truth. But emerging as well, in the negative background space created by his more conscious, foregrounded self definition, was a younger self, “don’t treat me like a baby,” a self who was needier, softer, prettier; “I have no time for pretty
words; don’t make me feel good,” a self wary of his deep and dangerous yearnings for care, protection and soothing—“just let me have it, call it the way you see it.” This internal conflict of self organizations was compounded in Sam’s relationship to me—his potential therapist—consulted but not yet engaged. I was surprised to learn that Sam had come to see me because a friend of his had given him several of my papers to read, papers about an inherently bidirectional, intersubjective notion of psychoanalysis, papers about feeling, disclosing, touching, even seducing. What was I to make of this brilliant and remote man, interested in being known but not in knowing, interested in facts and realities that would provide insights without intimacy, coming knowingly to an analyst who had stood for everything in which he claimed to be disinterested. I asked Sam this question: “Why a relational analyst?” He could answer only that he “didn’t know about that kind of thing,” that I had seemed smart and had come highly recommended. And so with Sam I became quickly aware of who I could not be. I could be smart, and sharp, and tough and clear and relentless, but I could not be soft, encouraging, kind, or empathic. Why had Sam chosen me? Why a woman? Why a relational analyst? I could only assume at this point that in some way the “whos” that I could not be were as important as those that I was allowed to be. It must be important for Sam that my presence embody the softer, more feminine, more maternal, something he knew from my writings that I could be and wanted to be but something that, in his case, especially for him, I would hold in some boundaried space—there but not acted upon. Sam would know that in many ways I wanted to reach out and touch him, but that for him I would not. There was, in this way, an elegance and unconscious wisdom, even courage to Sam’s choice; a choice based not only in the immediacy of who he was, who I was not allowed to be and who he could not be, but a choice based as well on the who’s, his and mine, that I held in abeyance; Sam had also chosen a potential space in which he and I might both “become.”

In the early days of my work with Sam I learned to inquire unobtrusively, creating a space in which he could feel free to explore his own history and his own inner life without experiencing the impingement he so clearly dreaded. I tried to hold any emotional responses in check and bracket (Slochower, 1996) any personal fantasies, dreams, or reflections for my own personal use in conducting the treatment. When I would, every so often, slip up and let escape an errant emotional reaction, Sam would shoot his penetrating stare in my direction, two laser beams of accusation and condemnation with the fear and anxiety hidden behind dense layers of impenetrable vigilance. Even the mildest and most common forms of empathic reaction—“That must have been so hard” or “How sad for you”—were enough to garner such a response.

Sam had come for treatment anxious and depressed over growing difficulties in his relationship with Jim, his partner for the past 5 years. Sam had met Jim in graduate school, and for each of them the relationship had been one of intimacy, wholeness, and deep recognition; a sense of coming home but to a place never quite inhabited before. In the first few years the erotic bond between Sam and Jim was intense; sex was, in Sam’s words, “bold, powerful and frequent.” In response to any inquiries by me, Sam erected an impenetrable shield of total happiness around his union with Jim. “Whatever his problems,” he would tell me, “the relationship was perfect.” Only slowly and with some pressure did certain issues begin to emerge. Jim wanted more “romance” in their relationship, Sam told me. He wanted, at times, to feel courted, pleased, seduced. While Sam wanted to “fuck” or “get laid,” Jim wanted, at least some of the time, “to make love.” He wanted soft music, good wine, candles, “more poetry and less power.” Sam was deeply contemptuous of Jim’s desires, considering them to be “silly,” “girlish,” “overly sentimental” and in the end deeply repugnant. It appeared that the poetry Jim wanted from Sam might well be the same
poetry Sam claimed not to want from me. Jim grew more insistent about his needs. Sam felt duped. Jim had seemed so different at the beginning. I suggested to Sam that the qualities he was now so repulsed by in Jim might perhaps represent aspects of himself that filled him with a kind of dread. I wondered whether he might be asking Jim to hold something of his own need for warmth, tenderness, even romantic passion so that he might experience them and despise them, all at the same time. In this way he could sense these experiences, but they would not penetrate to a place in which he might come to need them. I now felt able to point out to Sam the ways in which I too was asked to keep some of that same softness and tenderness out of our relationship, and to suggest the usefulness of exploring why it was that these qualities frightened him to the extent they did.

Whether this last comment was an empathic rupture or a necessary enactment or both I will never know, but Sam formed an immediate mental equivalence between the kind of romance that Jim wanted from him and the kind of experience he felt I was referring to having to “keep out” of our relationship. “Why would YOU want something like that from me?” Sam asked, his voice growing in volume and intensity. “Why would you even suggest, or wonder, or imagine that those kinds of feelings could exist between US? That someone like me could ever be attracted to or have romantic feelings, I mean romantic feelings toward someone like YOU?”

I’m sure I turned beet red. My first conscious thought was that perhaps enough had not been written about countertransference humiliation. I had not actually been suggesting to Sam, at least not consciously, the avoidance of an erotic dimension in the transference. I had been referring more to the kind of warmth, tenderness, and compassion I had felt compelled to keep in check. But Sam’s immediate equation of the soft, warm, and maternal with the romantic and the erotic speaks to the kind of delinearization of experience that I am trying to capture. The impossibility of separating out erotic feelings from those more connected to attachment needs and other forms of physical, sensual, bodily yearnings.

I felt an immediate wish to reassure Sam that he had misunderstood me; that I had not been asking him about erotic or romantic feelings. But the very intensity of his spontaneous denial made it seem important that the potential for the emergence of this aspect of our relational experience in either the transference or the countertransference not be foreclosed prematurely, even if it gave rise to intense humiliation, dread, and rage between us.

“You know, Sam,” I said, “I’m perfectly willing to be wrong in what I am suggesting to you. But I do have to wonder at the ferocity with which you are rejecting my question. Your words feel embarrassing, almost humiliating. It’s not something I’ve felt from you before. And it makes me wonder if you felt somehow in danger from my question to you. Or humiliated yourself by my words. What do you think?”

Sam felt clearly shaken. I felt shaken too, both from the impact of Sam’s words and from the awareness that I had upset him so deeply and so inadvertently. I had to convince him in these moments that I was more interested in our being able to hold, together, the atmosphere of danger and potential humiliation that emerged in connection with certain erotic or romantic potentials in our relationship than I was in an apology. I wanted to hold the enactment so that we might explore its textures and come to understand it and know it.

I knew from my work with Sam that he had always felt a close bond with both of his parents. As an only child, this bond was, if anything, at times too close. In an oftentimes stormy and difficult marriage, where both partners seemed unhappy and unfulfilled, Sam had often been the one to whom each parent turned for understanding and recognition. Initially, Sam reported
that with father this bond had felt safe and manageable. Father wanted a buddy, a pal, someone with whom to go places, the theater and sporting events, as well as someone with whom to share an intense intellectual camaraderie. But as our work deepened, Sam began to recall anxious thoughts that father’s need for him was too desperate, too needy, too yearning. There was a deeply uncomfortable foreboding that father actually preferred him to mother, preferred to be with him, share with him and ultimately discuss and debate with him. There was an aggressively passionate undertone that had at times left Sam feeling responsible for and guilty about his mother’s sense of loneliness and emotional, perhaps romantic abandonment by father, as if it was he who had stolen father away from her.

As a young boy, Sam felt close to his mother as well, often attempting to meet her needs for emotional closeness and intimacy. He found himself in the uniquely special but deeply dreaded place of feeling more important to both parents than they were to each other. Mother had seemed “hungry” for him, he remembered, and hungry for the warmth and physical intimacy that his “little boyishness” had offered to her. As Sam matured, their own particular confusion of tongues conflated warm physicality with erotic yearning, and the subject/object dimension blurred in an uncomfortable disorientation of who needed what from whom. At some point he finds difficult to date, Sam recalls an abrupt emotional withdrawal on mother’s part, and the distinct fantasy that another man had come into her life. He remembers feeling abandoned and relieved; now identified with mother in her state of emotional abandonment, craving her warmth and her touch, but spared the guilty relationship to both parents in which he felt that he was continually choosing one over the other.

As our work progressed it became clearer why Sam had chosen an analyst about whom he could know certain particulars. He needed to know something of how I usually worked. He then needed to insist that I work differently with him. And ultimately he needed to know that I was both willing and able to place those preferences or “needs” of my own in the background (something neither of his parents could do) while working in a way that enacted the unmistakable primacy of his needs without physically or emotionally abandoning or overstimulating him. I was able to wonder aloud, with Sam, whether this same dynamic was at work in his relationship with Jim. Did Jim have to express needs for a kind of warmth and intimacy that Sam could not fill, submerge those needs in spite of his yearnings, and thus prove to Sam that he loved him anyway?

I also came to understand how the atmosphere of rigorous and passionate intellectualism that Sam preferred, captured the acceptable emotional landscape of life with father, while the extruded emotionalism carried by Jim and by me represented the dreaded backdrop for potential overstimulation or abandonment more associated with maternal warmth, connection, and betrayal. As our work deepened and as Sam confronted the intensified pain and yearning of his childhood dilemmas and unmet needs, this schematic splitting of relational needs into bifurcated and gendered complementarities became more difficult to sustain. In his relationship with me, Sam became more sad, more needy, more desirous of warmth, sympathy, and connection, his capacity to experience these feelings more available to him. The availability of these needs in relationship to Jim seemed to open as well.

But Jim wanted more. As he tasted Sam’s softening and increased yearning, Jim redoubled his demand to have these aspects of Sam’s growing relational repertoire wrapped into their sexual and romantic life as well. Sam struggled.

“I can’t,” he tells me. “Whenever he says ‘Make love to me,’ I want to throw up. And I can’t tell him I feel that way. It would kill him. I feel desperate. I love Jim so much and I’m going to
lose him. Or I’m going to lose myself. I don’t know how to make love. Even the words make me
sick to my stomach.”

And then, abruptly, at least to Sam, Jim moved out. Sam was bereft, “almost out of his mind,”
hed told me. He clung to me for support and in this state of desperate clinging, about 2 months
after Jim’s departure, he had a dream. It was a frankly erotic, sexual dream about the two of us.
“We are naked together,” Sam tells me, “and we are fucking.” The word fucking is said angrily,
almost spit out at me in defiance. “But you are not happy. I think I may be hurting you. You are
whispering something to me, but I’m on you, and I can’t hear you, your words are muffled in the
pillow. I lean closer, but I still can’t hear you.” Sam is angry, anxious, and visibly shaken.

“It’s okay,” I say softly, trying to comfort him. The softness in my voice escapes before I can
catch it.

“Goddamn it, shut up,” Sam screams, as the inadvertent softness of my voice touches him.
“Get away from me. I don’t want you. What the hell are you doing to me? Don’t speak to me like
that . . . softly like that. I am a gay man . . . a GAY MAN,” Sam is yelling. “I came here with
a perfect relationship. I was happy. Now look what you’ve done. Jim is gone. I’m having sexual
dreams about us. What the fuck is this? Will you tell me please, what the fuck is going on?” And
then something in Sam’s persona seems to shift, the kaleidoscope has turned, and extremely softly
in almost a whisper . . . “I just remembered he said what you were saying. You were whispering,
‘Make love to me, Sam.’” Sam’s trembling has intensified, and mine has begun as well.

My countertransference in this moment feels almost as overwhelming to me as Sam’s expe-
rience clearly is to him. I try to think of what, of who, I am holding for Sam in this moment.
I am the analyst who has touched him too deeply, touched him somewhere he does not wish to be
touched. I am a woman who has touched him somewhere he does not want to be touched; spilling
over with something I was supposed to contain; something erotic, something sexual, something
dirty and toxic. I am a predator, a sexual predator, a female sexual predator, seducing a man,
a gay man who does not want a woman. But I am also a homoerotically needy father, reaching
out to an overstimulated and confused son. Trying to touch him, to be touched myself in a
place of deeply disavowed homoerotic yearning. I am a heterosexually predatory analyst carrying
100 years of professional guilt. I carry the intergenerational transmission of professional trauma.
I am a psychoanalyst implicitly accused of trying to alter the sexual orientation of her gay male
patient, a practice I reject and abhor. I am all of these things and a hundred others too illusive and
unformulated to mention. Suffice to say, I feel that I have failed.

But then again, maybe not, my brain whispers to me, like the me in the dream. Maybe Sam is
asking me to hold these feelings for him; the “make love to me,” something that feels toxic and
erotic, seductive and out of control. Something that is psychically associated with “making love.”
Perhaps it is my job to tolerate the potential shame, to capture and hold the projective identifi-
cation of this intense humiliation and self-loathing for Sam, all of those hateful and self-hating
self/others he cannot yet take in. This stabilizing possibility comes slowly. Am I the mother who
was warm and available but sexually needy and frustrated; the mother whose sexual needs got
confused with her son’s erotic yearnings until who was who and what was what became a dimen-
sion of dreaded overstimulation; a mother who could not contain; a mother who touched things
unspeakable; a mother whose sexuality seemed to spill over; a mother who stimulated all this, in
herself or in Sam, and then ran away. Gone. Nowhere. Unavailable for the emotional imbroglio
and necessary untangling. Don’t run like she did, the voice inside my head whispers again. Stay
where you are and bear Sam’s shame.
Is it possible that I am the father as well, I wonder. Not the father of safe, orderly, intellectual authority and debate, but the father who seeks out his son and not his wife. The father whose own homoerotic longings seem to have gone unanswered. The father whose forbidden yearnings spilled out of him, infiltrating his young son’s body, but banished from both of their minds, unformulated and fraught with dread. Hold these feelings for me, son, says father, so that I might feel them and despise them; hold them for me as Jim holds them for you, unmet and despised. Hold them for Sam, my voice whispers, so that he might despise them and you. Hold them without running away so that he might come to them slowly, and know them in a space that is not yet you or him, not yet male or female, not yet mother or father, not yet self or other, not yet homosexual or heterosexual.

“Wait a second, Sam,” I say, “hold on.” I try to reach deep down, inside a part of myself I cannot feel at the moment, and access a kind of authentic authority that could serve to counter any hint of the despised softness that stimulates Sam’s rage. “You know I don’t want to hurt you. And if I have done that, if I have hurt you or you and Jim, in some way that I didn’t see coming, I promise this much . . . I promise to stay with you and work with you until we see it through together. I promise you to do everything I can to try and put right what you feel has gone wrong. We may need someone else to consult with, to help us, or maybe we won’t and we can do it ourselves. But we’ll do whatever we need to do.” I do not tie my response in this moment to Sam’s mother’s abandonment, or to his father’s evacuated overstimulation. Insight will come later. But my own insight into Sam’s terror informs the relational position within which I chose what I will say.

Sam seems to calm at these words, and his breathing slows noticeably. Mine slows in response.

“I’m a gay man,” Sam tells me. “I’ve lost the deepest love of my life because I can’t say things like that to him directly. I don’t want a woman.”

“I understand that, Sam,” I tell him. “And I want to help you get Jim back. But what if there is a part of you, a small part, maybe a much younger part, that does want something from me . . . something from me that isn’t so different from what Jim wants from you . . . something that fills you with horror and nausea and makes you sick to your stomach with shame. So you tell yourself that I want it, or Jim wants it—not you. You don’t want it or need it, and a part of you, the part who does want that kind of thing, the part of you who, after all, created that dream, the part of you who found the courage to tell me that dream, that part of you shuts down.”

“What if it’s not about making love to a man or a woman, Sam . . . what if it’s something about just making love . . . saying I love you . . . being romantic. What if the horror of those feelings begins in something between you and a woman or between you and a man who defined those things for himself, and thereby for you, as too feminine, too discordant with being and feeling like a man.”

“I don’t know,” whispers Sam. “What then?”

“Maybe the fastest way back to Jim is through understanding what is happening here between us, using us to understand all of that,” I suggest. Sam seems not horrified by that prospect, and so I continue. “‘Make love to me, Sam’ sounds different in that context, doesn’t it? That woman in the dream . . . me . . . your mother . . . perhaps she is the mother who wanted from you what she could not have from your father, but also the woman rejected by your father, because in so many ways he preferred you . . . that part of your father who has to deny his own needs for something tender, loving, and erotic from a man. It is me in the dream, but me as your analyst,
me as a man/woman; a father/mother; a bigendered/bisexual other who expects you to hold the horrifying experience of my own unacceptable, horrifying, and disowned desires. In that context,” it seems to me, “making love involves nausea, involves throwing up and spitting back all that horrifying stuff, denied by others, which you have been asked to swallow and hold, unnamed and undigested”\(^2\) (see footnote 2 for the dilemmas involved in transcribing clinical process).

I share the particulars of the back and forth between Sam and me in order to capture something of the clinical sensibility in which a primary and secondary oedipal configuration moved in and out of the foregrounded clinical work between us; the heteroerotic connection between Sam and me, between Sam and his mother, and the homoerotic dimension in the transference, between Sam and me, between Sam and his father, between Sam’s father and his own father. I have tried to show how the disowned erotics of disowned sexualities gave rise to problematic inhibitions in the freedom, richness, and dimension of lovemaking that could occur; and how reintegrating these split-off, lost, or melancholic identifications into a more fully rendered bisexual eroticism allowed for a rapprochement in which Sam ultimately grew able to “make love” to Jim in a way that pleased them both and drew them into an increasingly intimate connection.

Let me switch gears now, entirely, and provide a completely different clinical example that will, I hope, begin to capture the multiplicity of ways in which this conceptual reformulation of primary and secondary oedipal configurations might be applied. I return to Sam at the end of the paper.

Samantha was 47 years old when she first consulted me for what she described as “completely inexplicable anxiety attacks” that had come upon her suddenly and left her otherwise meticulously ordered life reeling out of control. Samantha had been married to Alan, a corporate attorney, for 20 years, and together they had two children—a daughter, Emily, age 15 and a son, Benjamin, 13. She had moved up the corporate ladder to a position of formidable power and financial success, and appeared, in all ways, other than the symptoms described, to be almost a caricature of a certain type of outwardly ambitious and successful New Yorker.

Curiously for someone of her intelligence, Samantha had absolutely no idea what aspects of her day-to-day life or issues of her inner life might be contributing to the anxiety symptoms with which she presented, and she could offer surprisingly little, even on a speculative level, of where she thought the trouble might lie. She described her marriage as “happy enough,” although in a manner that seemed to elide contradiction she also informed me that she had had multiple brief and “meaningless” affairs throughout her marriage, not because “she did not love her husband”—she assured me that she did—but because she only found sexual satisfaction in wild and dangerous liaisons with “the kind of men she wouldn’t dream of marrying.” Likewise, she told me that she thought her children were doing “reasonably well,” although further exploration revealed (at least to me) that she actually spent little time with her children and had little ability to describe them as unique and differentiated individuals. This lack of insight or self-reflective curiosity about

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\(^2\)I think it is important to add here, that one unfortunate artifact of clinical writing is the need to collapse interactions and “interpretations” that were unpacked over months of clinical work and were elaborated in years of deepening understanding. Although my comments to Sam, previously described, are verbatim, they were never offered all at once in the precise manner described, but rather offered across time, as each particular dimension could be tolerated, experienced, and integrated. A psychoanalytic paper asks its author to use clinical material in order to explicate how certain theoretical ideas impact the analytic work. That is why we write. But I do want to note that the tact, timing, and empathic sensitivity with which we proceed is unique to each individual and harder to capture in the confines of a brief paper.
her marriage or her children was particularly noteworthy given what emerged as the patient’s remarkable flair for capturing the essence of significant others in her external life and describing them to me with great acuity and humor. I often enjoyed her descriptions of colleagues and workmates, laughing with her and impressed, at first, by what appeared to be her observational acumen. The first thing that struck me in my early sessions with Samantha was her vivacity and wit, and the skillful way in which she employed language to capture and hold my attention. Samantha was entertaining, and her hours always passed quickly.

The second thing that struck me in my early sessions with Samantha was her rather stunningly well-coordinated appearance and style of dress. Living and practicing in the heart of Manhattan, I see many well-dressed men and women in my practice. But Samantha’s appearance seemed really quite remarkable, even in this context. Her hair was always perfect. Her makeup was always perfect. She never seemed to perspire or sweat, even in the dead of summer, and every piece of clothing fell around her with the flawless drape of a sculpted statue. Every blouse seemed dyed to match every suit with utter perfection; the material chosen always the quintessential textural counterpoint. If the suit material was silky and smooth, the blouse would be knubby and subtly textured; if the suit was highly textured, the blouse would exude the kind of softness that one wanted to reach out and touch. Each piece of jewelry worn seemed unique and designed to enhance the outfit with which it was paired. And I quickly lost track of how many gorgeous handbags and pairs of shoes Samantha owned.

You might well wonder why I am spending so much time describing the superficialities of Samantha’s physical appearance instead of focusing your attention on the more interesting nuances of her personality and character. I do this because I want your introduction to the patient to follow my own countertransferential process, and it is only in retrospect that I became aware of how utterly mesmerized I had been by the external dazzle of the patient’s almost aesthetically contrived exterior. Some unconscious admixture of admiration and envy that left me initially blinded by the light, too busy studying how she turned a phrase to be as funny as she was, or how she chose a necklace with an opalescent sheen that so perfectly captured the color and hue of the buttons on her suit. It is rather difficult to admit that in those early days I existed in a kind of thrall to the patient’s impact, in a transference/countertransference reversal of the usual power and vulnerability balance that marks the opening phases of most treatments.

Only slowly did I become aware of the embarrassingly masochistic dimension of my early relationship to Samantha. It took several months for me to realize that in the patient’s presence I had grown to feel uncomfortable in my own skin. Although I had always valued what I considered to be my ability to use language in expressive and evocative ways, my words, when I was with Samantha, felt flat, cumbersome, and pedestrian. I felt stupid. I felt too frumpy, too dowdy, and too old. Clothes I had valued and in which I felt particularly comfortable and attractive began to feel inadequate, unstylish, and unflattering. My skin, my hair, my teeth, my brain, my body, my office furnishings, the apartment in which I lived, even the vacations I took began to feel inadequate in the shadow of Samantha’s glitter. A very old and unwelcome self state seemed to occupy my times with the patient. I pulled on myself and my clothing the way I hadn’t done since middle school, and I resented being asked to remember. I cringed under Samantha’s gaze, feeling the poignant sting of every bodily, physical flaw she would undoubtedly see in my ever more pitiable presence. I began to feel quite young and inadequate as Samantha began to embody every girl who had rejected, excluded, or damned me to social hell in the oftentimes excruciating adolescent passage.
Slowly I came to realize that although I was dazzled by Samantha’s style and wit, the uncomfortable truth was that I did not like her very much. I began to see how her humorous and entertaining descriptions of others were really quite cruel, and I became aware of the coercive force that drew me into laughing at these other people with her in order to garner her approval and establish some kind of bond or alliance with her. It became clearer to me that establishing an alliance with this patient meant joining her in targeting someone else. I was upset with myself, concerned about the seeming ease with which I had been drawn into this unholy alliance. As I listened from this newly emerging perspective I came to see how most of her “close friendships” seemed similarly structured; friends seemed more concerned with remaining inside Samantha’s narcissistic glow, invited to her parties, included in her confidences, and avoiding the always present threat of incurring her rather devastating disfavor. I recall during one session around this time associating to a conversation I had had many years earlier with my then adolescent daughter who was regaling me with stories about the so-called “popular girls” at her high school, about the power and cruelty they wielded. With casual abandon and a delightfully childlike naivete about the paradox she was communicating she announced to me, “Everyone secretly hates the popular girls you know . . . even the boys.” “If everyone hates them,” I queried, intrigued and puzzled by my daughter’s pronouncement, thinking of my own and everyone else’s high school agonies, “why do you think they are called the ‘popular girls’?” In recalling and holding the paradox of that moment with my daughter, the dazzle with which I had been blinded seemed to begin to fade and I grew increasingly able to see that Samantha was really something of a grown-up, corporate “mean girl.” I felt somehow freed to deal with Samantha from within a different self state of my own, no longer 16, no longer concerned with being included and accepted. I became a grown-up analyst again, capable of now seeing the pain and frustration of Samantha’s seamless existence; the price she paid for evacuating her own longing and envy into everyone else; being wanted but never allowing herself to want or need; turning herself into the consummate object of everyone else’s envy in order to deal with that which she could not have. I came to see, as well, the intense loneliness of being unknown, envied, and secretly hated by those who had been constructed to idealize her and crave her approval.

From an older, wiser, and more confident self state I began to speak with Samantha of the relentlessness of her drive toward perfection, of her loneliness within that singular pursuit, and of the subtle cruelty with which she described those who had never incurred, or had fallen out of her favor. She revealed to me with some pain that her mother had always called her a “cold fish,” because she had always shied away from her mother’s embrace. She recalled that mother had openly preferred her younger brother who was a cuddlier and more physically affectionate child. Once when she was older Samantha recalled overhearing her mother describing Samantha as “a bitch who went after what she wanted without concern for anyone else.” Samantha struggled during this phase of her treatment with whether her mother had been “right” about her. She wondered if she was capable of loving someone. She knew she could care about people—she cared about her husband and her children. She knew that she could give to people and provide them with things they wanted and needed, but she suspected that this was only so that they would admire and love her. But whether or not she, Samantha, could actually love others remained an open question.

Samantha recalled that it was her father who had, from early on, helped her to cultivate a certain sense of style and flair, and had educated her about the importance of being able to command people’s attention and regard. Father dressed Samantha and styled her; it was he who went
shopping with her, doted on her, admired her, and spent more money on her than this middle-class family could spare. He called it an “investment in her future.” He watched what she ate and supervised her diet, often joking about the pudginess or chubbiness of Samantha’s friends. Indeed father was often derisive of mother for growing old and “dumpy” (his word), although Samantha remembers her mother, at this time, as physically active and slim. “It’s just that the women on her side of the family had breasts and hips,” Samantha explained to me, “they were rounder and softer. I looked more like my father, more like a boy actually. We were both straight up and down like sticks. My father liked me that way. My mother could never look like us and I could never look like her. I started to think that breasts and hips were ugly. I still do. I look at a woman’s breasts, even today, and I feel strange, in my body. And then I get angry and I want to strike out at her.”

Samantha didn’t quite understand what this meant. She did not yet seem to hear father’s aversion to the female womanly form and her own identification with this secondary oedipal organization within him. She did not yet wonder, as I did, whether mother’s preference for brother had followed upon father’s rejection of her own sexuality, or whether her powerful rejection of Samantha had represented an evacuation of her own homoerotic yearnings. All of this it seemed would have to come slowly, over the course of the analysis. What Samantha did seem to intuit, however, on the most basic level, was that to hold people’s attention, to hold a man’s attention, meant to dazzle and bemuse in such a way that she would never be known. After all, mother; mother with her soft breasts and round hips, mother knew her. And mother thought she was a cold bitch.

So Samantha craved her father’s approval, even though this meant joining him in despising everything soft, feminine, and maternal. Samantha had to laugh at father’s derisive comments in order to be loved by him in the way I and others felt coerced into laughing cruelly with Samantha in order to secure her favor. The rupture between Samantha and her mother intensified. Samantha became anorexic in an attempt to keep her body hard and straight and prepubescent. Deprived of maternal warmth and affection Samantha began turning to boys and to a precocious sexuality as a substitute for maternal physicality and affectionate contact. From childhood on, she evacuated her own vulnerability, insecurity, and pain into those girls she hatefully targeted, asking them to carry her own pain and sense of maternal rejection. The pattern of being feared and envied by others while evacuating her own neediness pain and vulnerability into her victims was set down early.

As something of an aside, it is interesting to wonder how much light Samantha’s story casts on our understanding of the entire “mean girl” phenomenon—the hateful targeting of one girl out of a group of friends, the painful exclusion and blackballing about which we have become so painfully aware in the popular media of late. As it is long understood as a result of women’s difficulties with aggression and competition, I am suggesting here that the phenomenon might also be read as a failure of a certain kind of homoerotic, mother/daughter love that surfaces at times of particular vulnerability and separation. A group phenomena in which one girl, perhaps the most vulnerable, perhaps the most sensitive, perhaps the one who elicits for one reason or another the most homoerotic longing, becomes the carrier for the group, the one who holds the pain of separations and unmet longings. Perhaps this explains why the phenomenon is most intense at moments of heightened separation, entry into middle school when girls give up the tie to one classroom teacher, and of course the final days of high school when college separation looms large. This failure of mother/daughter erotics might also suffuse the rejection of the female body so common
in adolescent eating disorders. I do not eat, I do not yearn, I do not desire, breasts or hips or soft curves that draw me in and threaten to overwhelm and engulf. I reject it all. Certainly these dynamics were at play for Samantha. One could track them from her early childhood, through middle school and high school and into her current day to day relationships with other women.

Over the first 5 years of analytic work many of these dynamics became clearer to Samantha. She seemed less harsh, more available to her children, her husband, her female friends, and employees. She became aware that her husband satisfied much of her need for maternal love but became feminized and unexciting to her as a consequence. Her split-off lovers, “the bad boys,” held the excitement and danger of her father; adoring, pursuing seducers who were sexually exciting but ultimately unavailable. Much of this became dynamically accessible to Samantha, but her frequent bouts of anxiety and panic continued until an unusual confluence of events occurred, a confluence of events that threw many of these issues into the heart of the therapeutic relationship.

Until this time my own relationship with Samantha remained rather stuck, despite my efforts to dislodge it, in a seeming repeat of her relationship to her husband, Alan. I was a person who supported Samantha, mirrored her and approved of her. I became part of the substantial scaffolding that her invulnerability required. As such I was highly important but subtly devalued, that which I offered unrecognized and unexciting, yet essential like mother’s milk. Although this pattern could become dislodged at times when I was forced to be more confronting of Samantha’s cruelty, the negative transference could not be sustained for long and I would often feel frustrated with the ways in which we would always slide inexorably back to our default position.

In the fifth year of her analysis, Samantha’s father died and the patient returned to her family home to sit shiva with her mother, brother, and extended family. Both the patient and her mother were physically reduced, vulnerable, and in pain. Samantha’s mother was more needy in her grief and sought out physical contact and comfort with the patient in a manner not typical of their relationship. Samantha, now a veteran analytic patient, was horrified with the combination of yearning and revulsion she felt toward physical contact with mother. Samantha was one of those patients, mentioned at the outset of this paper, who during this time climbed into bed with her aging mother, holding mother’s body next to hers. However, during this same period of time, Samantha reported a dream in which I was trying to seduce her and excite her sexually. At first uncomfortable but aroused by my overtures, Samantha reported with horror that she ultimately grabbed a knife in the dream and began ripping into me... cutting my body to shreds, and trying to halt, in such a way, the urgent craving desire in her own body. It was only in the midst of being flooded with such homoerotic yearnings and horrors in her relationship to both mother and me that Samantha was able to understand, for the first time and with utter shock, that the panic attacks that had brought her into treatment had begun around the time that her daughter Emily had reached puberty and had begun to develop the hated, dreaded, deeply desired breasts and hips of a woman’s body. It was also at this time, and in a manner I must admit that seemed almost too “psychically neat” to be believed, that Emily, now 20, came to her parents and asked if she might have breast reduction surgery, because she hated her body and wanted her body to look more like her mother’s.

There is much more that could be said about Samantha and about the evolution of her analytic treatment, about the ways in which she came to understand aspects of her sensual, erotic self as contained within relational configurations that were acceptable in some instances and unacceptable in others; about how, ultimately, integration of aspects of self incorporated within repressed self/other configurations allowed new and emergent self states to bridge previously bifurcated dimensions of sexual experience.
For both Sam and Samantha, the exploration in analysis, of that which I am calling the secondary oedipal constellation, brought to consciousness new and previously unavailable dimensions of erotic life. For Sam, this reawakening occurred on two fronts. He had to come to terms with a maternal erotic that was too hungry, too needy, too boundaryless and potentially fragile. In this space, amidst these self/other organizations, a more tender maternal eros drew Sam into a place that threatened to overwhelm him and dissolve him, a place in which the self/other organizations of power, force, and aggressive opposition needed to salvage his self were too inextricably wound up with the potential to destroy the other, a place in which the other was unable to recognize that Sam was too small, too young, too fragile himself to unpack and decipher mother’s own particular confusion of tongues and the impossible burden it placed within him. But for Sam, the primary oedipal constellation with father, the capacity for a more tender, loving, and deeply penetrating homoerotic experience failed as well. Sam’s particular organizations of a more tender homoerotic love involved experience, real and imaginary, with a father whose own powerful homoerotic needs were denied and evacuated; a self/other system in which Sam was expected to hold and meet father’s powerful homoerotic needs in a way that did not threaten father’s denial and evacuation of them. For both Sam and his father, disavowed secondary oedipal constellations, in Sam’s case heteroerotic, in father’s case homoerotic, led to a unique patterning and texturing of erotic possibilities, possibilities that allowed for vigorous, powerful, passionate interaction that did not reawaken or even stir any softer and more tender yearnings.

For Samantha, the backgrounded piece of erotic longing that emerged in the transference was a long-held and profound yearning for the deeply sensual homoerotic bond with mother that lay dormant and unrealized in mother’s clear and unselfconscious exhibition of an emotional preference for and deeply sensual and oedipally romantic engagement with brother. An identification with mother’s own disavowed homoerotic desires. A secondary oedipal configuration of iciness, rage, and evacuated longing that marked Samantha’s very difficult alliances with women; nonaggression pacts that substituted for the more intimate friendships she could not bare to open herself to; the loneliness of feeling hated by those who envied rather than loved her; by those women asked to carry her own projected disavowed need to be sought after and loved by other women rather than loving and seeking other women for herself; a hatred and need to destroy other women who carried their own breasts, their own hips, their own uniquely feminine desires with the acceptance, pleasure, and pride that Samantha could not find or feel. For Samantha, analytic understanding of this secondary oedipal configuration in which deep longing for an erotic/sensual mother–daughter connection was disavowed and projected, allowed for a beginning synthesis of the “good boy” “bad boy” split that had always bifurcated her erotic life. No longer forced to extrude the maternal erotic so that it was held by others who desired her, Samantha came to understand the way in which “good boys,” the “kind you married,” were feminized by her so that they could provide the warmth, containment, and nourishment she craved without bringing her dangerously close to the homoeroticism she so deeply desired and feared, while the “bad boys” the kind you had affairs with, held the safe breastless, hipless, “straight-up-and-down-like-a-stick” passionate encounter that aroused and excited her without penetrating to a place of dangerous intimacy and longing. Let us take note here that for both Sam and Samantha, analysis of the dynamic interplay between primary and secondary oedipal configurations had no observable impact on their primary sexual orientation, that is, whom they made love to. It did, however, have a profound impact on the way in which that love was expressed; the resilience, robustness, and freedom for what I have called a kind of polymorphous playfulness in the transformation of erotic fantasy into actual, experienced sexual pleasure.
When we look into a kaleidoscope we see shifting patterns of colors and shapes—orange squares, purple circles, familiar colors, shapes we know and some we can’t quite define. And if we study specifically the erotic kaleidoscope inside each of us we see patterns not of shape and color but patterns of identification and counteridentification, organizations of a male erotic and a female erotic, a maternal erotic and a paternal erotic, or two different maternal erotics and two different paternal erotics; patterns organized around experiences of arousal and temptation and experiences of surrender and quiescence, powerful experiences of homoeroticism and heteroeroticism, experiences of identificatory gender congruity and incongruity. Inside each of us, a uniqueness born of endless possibility. Where I myself have looked for complexes, I find infinite complexity. But the search for universal dimensions helps us navigate the storm and provides illusory safe harbors from which to view and try to understand the otherwise incomprehensible. Such harbors are momentary havens of partial comprehension, useful as long as we remember to move on to the next harbor and absorb as thoroughly as we can its dramatically different perspectives and visions.

Sexual attraction is often referred to as chemistry, aptly termed because it is the place in which we take two more or less stable systems of self organization and pull them apart so that they may combine with each other in new patterns of erotic affinity and disaffinity. Perhaps this is why love destabilizes us and passion always contains more than a modicum of terror. As Steve Mitchell (2001) wrote in his posthumously published book *Can Love Last?*

The cultivation of romance in relationships requires two people who are fascinated by the ways in which individually and together, they generate forms of life they hope they can count on. It entails a tolerance of the fragility of these hopes, woven together from realities and fantasies, and an appreciation of the ways in which, in the rich density of contemporary life, realities often become fantasy and fantasies often become reality. (p. 201)

And so I stare down the gauntlet of Ted’s challenge. He is a gay man who has fallen in love with a woman. Ted makes passionate love to Debra, but outside the context of that specific relationship he still finds himself far more erotically drawn to men than women. I will not explain to Ted what has happened. I cannot. And if truth be known I would not, nor would he want me to. Ted has spent too many years in analysis to seek that kind of certainty and closure. Chemistry, after all, can be explained with formulas and equations that render it knowable and therefore, ultimately, predictable. Love, passion, sexual attraction has, perhaps, more in common with alchemy. Not reducible to formulas, no predictable equations, resoundingly unscientific; and always infused with that quintessential dose of magic, enchantment, and inexplicable transformation that renders us willing even eager victims to its thrall.

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