



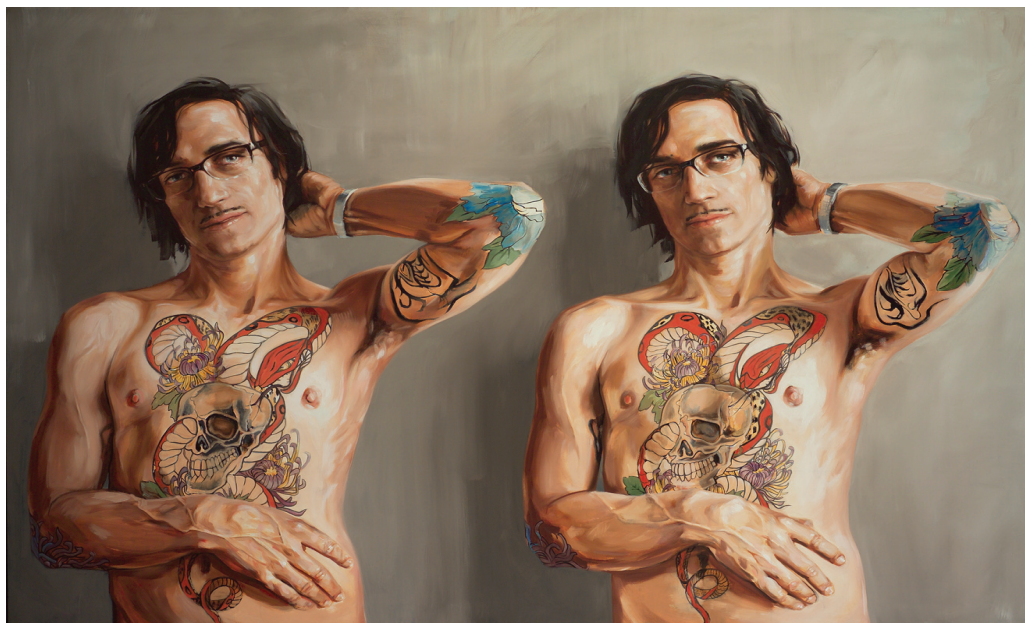
dialog

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PHILOCTETES CENTER
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Mating in Captivity



Kristi Ropeleski, Blood Harmony 4.1 (Photo: Paul Litherland)

Owen Renik, Training and Supervising Analyst at the San Francisco Center for Psychoanalysis, moderated the September 13 roundtable, *Mating in Captivity*, the first in a series of six roundtables dealing with the biology and psychology of sexuality. He began by observing that sex, unlike some of the other specialized disciplines addressed at the Philoctetes Center, is not an esoteric topic. “Most of the audience has experience with sexuality within a relationship.”

Renik then turned to panelist **Esther Perel**, a family therapist whose book, *Mating in Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic and the Domestic*, was both the namesake and the inspiration for the roundtable. The title of her book refers to a poem by D.H. Lawrence, in which the poet refers to wild things in captivity in order to critique modern domesticity. “Is there an inevitable contradiction,” Renik asked, “between living sexual life to the fullest and having a long-term monogamous relationship?”

Perel was intrigued by the fact that pandas and bonobos had to be shown porn so they would mate when in captivity. This curious practice inspired the central question of her book: Why is it that great sex so often fails

for people who continue to really love each other over a long period of time? The answer, she concluded, was the paradoxical intersection between our need for stability and our need for risk as an erotic stimulant.

Pamela Paul, author of *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony*, noted that in the early 20th century people married early and lived into their 40s, meaning that marriage lasted 10-15 years. Today, on the other hand, if a couple marries at 26 and lives to 85, then they mate for 60 years. Paul emphasized that this is a tremendous undertaking in purely logistical terms, to say nothing of the expectation of ongoing sexual activity.

Center Co-Director **Francis Levy**, author of the recently published novel, *Erotomania: A Romance*, pointed out that because marriage is a dyad, and because there is an important kind of mirroring that occurs in a dyadic relationship, each partner has to identify strongly with the other, which can be difficult to sustain over time. Perel responded by explaining that her primary interest is in eroticism, rather than the marriage dynamic as a whole. Sex, she emphasized, is an antidote to death, one that contains the possibility of transcendence.

Note from Francis Levy: The Imagination of Sexuality

As our recent roundtables on the biology of romance and the chemistry of intimacy pointed out, sexual drive is what man has in common with primates and other animals, along with those forms of emotions that derive from the subcortical or limbic brain. However, the imagination of sexuality, the imprint that sexual drives leave on the neurogenic pathways of the brain (and which live on long after the biological desire for sex is diminished) is what fundamentally separates man from animal.

The imagination of sexuality necessarily implies an esthetics of sexuality. In the 1960s, two central tomes, Norman O. Brown’s *Love’s Body* and Herbert Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man*, proposed two equal and opposing esthetics of sexuality. Brown used the term “polymorphous perversity” to describe a dying ego and superego presided over by regression states, in which the line between infant and adult was forever blurred. Marcuse on the other hand offered the Hegelian antithesis in the notion of “repressive desublimation,” according to which the selfsame freedoms that Brown championed were looked at as cutting short the process by which sexual energy is channeled into effective means of social change, revolution and, ultimately, the most revolutionary refinement of consciousness itself—art. The two kinds of liberation, individual and societal, represented a divergence in the avant garde movement that had run throughout both politics and art in the latter part of the 19th and early twentieth centuries.

Taking the Marcusean view, physical sexuality is actually a rather limited project that bears some degree of resemblance to the process of gestation that it both produces and mimics. Sex is only the pupa that can eventually bring about its metaphorical butterfly, either as an infant or work of art. In modern post-industrial society, people increasingly seek ways to prolong both their lives and their sexuality. The prolongation of sexual activity has a symbolic value in that it is ►►

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This desire for a meaningful physical dynamic, she continued, has led to a moment in history where for the first time sex in long-term relationships is more rooted in desire than in reproduction. “What fuels the desire and what fuels love,” she asked, “and how are they at odds?”

Levy speculated that one requirement for sustaining desire in a long-term relationship is imagination. Allowing for a chameleon-like quality of personality can be a saving grace in a marriage, enabling partners to enact their erotic sides. “People should be free to not be themselves in a relationship,” Levy proposed. Perel underscored this notion by specifying that while sex is primordial, eroticism is a creative act, and therefore quintessentially human.

In response to Perel’s premise that humans have an impossible laundry list of needs in their relationships—companionship, stability, friendship, sexual fulfillment—**Michael Kimmel**, Professor of Sociology at SUNY Stony Brook and editor of the scholarly journal *Men and Masculinities*, asked how we know for sure that for many people these needs aren’t in fact met. Paul noted that in her experience, the idea of having both a great sex partner and a reliable domestic partner is widely seen as naïve, and many couples eventually let go of the illusion of sexual harmony and are still able to be happy. Perel asserted that some people opt for non-monogamy as an attempt to cope with the disappointment of a naïve ideal, but that in most cases monogamy is seen as the sacred cow of married life and exclusivity is non-negotiable. But Paul argued that monogamy is more than a social construct. “I still think there’s something biological and practical that makes monogamy sensible ... there’s the question of parenthood. You can’t establish parenthood without monogamy.”

Questioning the notion that the erotic is fed by mystery and imbalance, Professor Kimmel endorsed the feminist ideal of equality in relationships, enthusiastically pronouncing, “I believe equality is super hot.” He went on to report that men who share childcare and cooking tasks report higher levels of marital satisfaction, perform better at work, have children who are more successful in school, and are generally happier than men in less egalitarian marriages. Thus, equality in a marriage need not be the damper on eros that it is often assumed to be, since sharing the domestic workload tempers the resentment and anger that can undermine healthy sexuality.

Perel persisted with her thesis that the closeness of domesticity undermines desire, which “needs space and a bridge to cross.” When someone sees their partner as a separate person, engaged in something they are passionate about, they become momentarily unknown. “In that space,” insisted Perel, “is the erotic. Caretaking is not erotic.”

Mediating the stark contrast between the views of her fellow panelists, Paul theorized that both were predicated on the unrealistic expectation that everything in a marriage happens at the same time, when in fact most relationships are cyclical and sequential. During childbearing years, for instance, there is often greater distance, which allows for a later return to sensuality. But Paul reinforced the idea that remoteness fuels the erotic, stating, “You don’t want what you already have.”

Perel emphasized the illusion of ownership inherent in this premise, quipping, “You never *have* your partner. You have them on loan with an option to renew.” She explained that in quest of the security of the nuclear family model, we collapse the space between partners. But that space holds the very energy that brings intimacy into being. To escape this tension, people intuitively seek out transgression. But Perel offered hope for those seeking deep sexual fulfillment within the home, paraphrasing the words of Marcel Proust: “The true voyage of discovery is not to go to new places, but to look with new eyes.” *A.L.*

Philoctetes Fellowship Program

Three candidates at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute training program were awarded Philoctetes Fellowships for the 2008-2009 academic year. In addition to their coursework at the Institute, Philoctetes Fellows will volunteer at the Center, regularly attend Philoctetes roundtables, and submit a publishable paper related to imagination and psychoanalytic or neuroanalytic theory.

Cristina Davis received her B.A. at Harvard College, where she studied Romance Languages and Literatures. She proceeded to the Ph.D. program in Clinical Psychology at Adelphi University’s Derner Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies. She is currently a fifth-year doctoral candidate completing her clinical internship at the Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services. She works at their Youth Counseling League, where she is pursuing an adolescent specialization, and at their general outpatient clinic. As a Philoctetes Fellow, she is following her interest in music and psychology. Her doctoral research is on the effects of music on mood and perception.

Adam Libow is a second-year clinical fellow and chief resident in the division of child and adolescent psychiatry at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. He received his B.A. in neuroscience from Johns Hopkins University, and his M.D. from Weill Cornell Medical College. He went on to train in general adult psychiatry at the Payne Whitney Clinic of the New York Presbyterian Hospital Weill Cornell campus before beginning his fellowship at Mount Sinai. In July, he was a panelist at the Philoctetes roundtable, *Place, Imagination, and Identity*. In addition to clinical work, Adam has interests in the history of psychoanalysis and the challenges of interdisciplinary exchange. Through the Philoctetes Center Fellowship he will pursue a project on the historical relationship between psychoanalysis and American medicine in the 1930s.

Jamieson Webster completed her A.A. at Simon’s Rock College of Bard, and went on to receive her B.A. at Sarah Lawrence College. She then attended the New School University for the last year of its Psychoanalytic Studies Program, working with Alan Bass, Paola Mieli, and Julia Kristeva. She began her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at City University, where she worked with Dr. Norbert Freedman and the IPTAR research program on their study of a recorded psychoanalysis and symbolization in psychoanalytic process. In addition, she continued to focus on French psychoanalysis and the clinical thinking of Jacques Lacan. She has published several articles, including “Women on the Margins of the Freud Family” (2007) and “The Ethical and Logical Lacan” (2008) in *Contemporary Psychology*, and “On Love and Shame” (2008) in *Cardozo Law Review*. She teaches Freud as an adjunct faculty member at the New School University. As a Philoctetes Fellow, she is currently preparing the roundtable, *Anxiety and Ecstasy*.

Next Issue: The Art and Science of Politics

Following the roundtable, *Voters and Friends: Group Influence in Individual Political Belief*, the Center took advantage of a scheduling quirk to screen a live broadcast of the third presidential debate between John McCain and Barack Obama. The roundtable, the second in the Re:Mind series, *The Art and Science of Politics*, looked at the effects of crowd psychology and identity on individual political belief. The final roundtable in the series, *The Design of Influence: How Images and Words Sway Minds*, was held on October 22. Both of these events will be addressed in the next edition of *Dialog*, with the outcome of the election undoubtedly offering additional perspective.