

# Sexuality as Enigma, Emergent from Otherness and an Agent of Interpellation

Dr. Adrienne E. Harris

In this North American contribution to the ejournal issue on Sexualities, I draw on an important European generated influence, the work of Jean Laplanche. (1997, 1999, 2015). I want to pull his radical revision of drive theory and classical metapsychology into a conversation with the North American projects in which gender and sexuality, along with categories of identity such as race, class and culture are treated as integratable fluid forms of identification and subjectification.

I stand in some important footprints. In particular, this is the project that engaged the late Ruth Stein, (2007, 2008) who drew on Laplanche's model of enigmatic seduction, early helplessness, unconscious transmission of messages, translation and finally *après coup* as an unfolding account of the complex construction of sex, gender and the "sexuel" (Laplanche's term). In the past decade, primarily through the powerful force of translations of Laplanche, English speaking psychoanalysts have been able to absorb the complexity and scope of Laplanche's theory.

Laplanche continuously and insistently uses the term "maternal seduction" to convey the experience in which messages, remaining initially unconscious to sender and receiver, are an inevitable experience of early parent child engagement (1997). He is most insistent on the matter of asymmetry. It is this insistence that led him to organize this aspect of his theory under the rubric "The General Anthropological Situation." The persons involved in the transmission from the adult side will vary: parents, caretakers, siblings and others that the child encounters. But while the person varies, asymmetry in the relation of adult to child is a constant. Stein (2008), Saketopoulou (2014; in press) and others draw on these ideas in order to think of the message, a crucial part of the origination and installation of infantile sexuality, as a central contribution to the inherently excessive aspects of sexuality.

Messages, which are passed from the unconscious of the adult to the child, transmit in an enigmatic, unpredictable process. The messages are, to a large degree, uncoded by sender or receiver, at least not initially at the point of transmission. Laplanche's central and brilliant insight/discovery is that it is these enigmatic messages that come to constitute the unconscious and as the infantile sexual unconscious in the child. Infantile sexuality in the child is the outcome of enigmatic intrusions from the other: one outside the child but deeply entrenched. The child is not empty or unresponsive, but initially the infant is helpless. It is this fundamental asymmetry, interwoven with unconscious transmission adult to child that yields the potency, the enigmatic character and the inevitable excess that is constitutive of sexuality.

Whatever sensory and receptive/enactive processes are in the child, sexuality, in the form of the infantile sexuality of the adult arrives from an alien source. It is this part of the theory that adds so powerfully to the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2011) : namely the sensitivity and susceptibility of the child to sexualization from "others."

Crenshaw's concept – intersectionality, came from a black feminist theoretical perspective and has been a challenge for psychoanalysts to take on. She asks us to consider that gender and sexuality will always be engaged, perhaps compromised, interwoven with many other aspects of subjectivity:

race, class, culture But she ask more.

She was interested in the way people are caught among multiple, marginalized identifications and are consequently multiply – vulnerable to subordination. It is an argument following on Fanon who unpacked the powerful force of excitement and dread and envy across racial divides shaped the murderous attack on the black male body. I return to this at the end of this essay.

Both Laplanche and Crenshaw, separately and taken together, make a definitive move from the notion of innate drive and endogenous forms of sexuality. Laplanche argues, we are sexed; male and female, we are gendered: that arrives as an ascription and we are sexualized via messages from the sexual unconscious of others. At the same time, a crucial element for Laplanche was to stress the difference between the normativity of implantation and the pathology and excessive trauma of intromission. Intromission, for Laplanche very graphically consists of sexual abuse, incest and excessive sexual trauma adult to child.

Within French psychoanalysis, Chetrit-Vatine (2004) has a particularly felicitous way of interweaving the attunement of attachment and the excess of sexuality. The enigma is not solely in the transmission phase but continues its unpredictable effects in the longer process of translation, which may be solitary reflection, unconscious transformation or dialogic interaction in which conscious and unconscious forms persist. It is a lot of negative capability to have to live with. But this model of transmission and translation allows us to craft developmental models less harnessed to or hijacked by genetic and biologically driven approaches.

If the binaries of race and gender and sexuality function as interpellating forces within psychoanalytic theory, it is also true that psychoanalysis in a variety of critical projects has pushed against this doctrinal pressure. I will argue that Laplanche's model – its dialectical and emergent properties, its focus on emergence offers some new ways to think of the development of gender and sexuality and the complex intersectional interweave of various categories of subjectivity: class, culture, race along with gender and sexuality.

The complex building blocks of representation take us further away from the organization and focus of Lacan and closer both to Laplanchean theory and to Bion.

Within the interpersonal tradition, Levenson and Bromberg would locate these deep attunement to unsymbolizable experience to Sullivan and his theorizing of dissociation and “not-me” experience. All these models of speech structure and the layering of representation and consciousness help in the elaboration of gender complexity and its interface and encounter with sexuality and other aspects of subjectivity.

In the light of these evolutions post Laplanchean, I want to expand what is potentially transmitted in a message and to see the interweaving of various categories of subjectivity (race, gender, class for example) within what is a message that transmits sexuality. Additionally, I see the mechanism, apparatus of enigmatic message as a processes whereby a spectrum of traumatic experiences (lethal and usual) will be intergenerationally transmitted. Laplanche's model of enigmatic maternal seduction is a version of alpha work though much more erotic and embedded and somatic than a Bionian focus on the grid might envision.

The enigmatic maternal seduction may be, in addition to its various effects of establishing unconsciousness and sexuality in the infant and evolving child also an act of interpellation. I do not

mean this as always a consciously intended communication. Interpellations arise in many forms across a spectrum of conscious and unconscious experience. It might be interesting to think of a message which installs some aspects of sexuality in the child simultaneously shames and forbids this formation.

In this way, we can imagine that amidst the enigmatic message of desire is the message as to its moral, perhaps even legal character. Laplanche himself engages a discussion of the function of taboo in translation, but perhaps misses an opportunity to notice how much the impossibility or pathologizing of desires and identifications may be embedded in the transmission and thus eligible in unimaginably complex ways for translation. What renovations or reworking of binaries in identity formation might be visible if we understand that the excessive, the beyond easy registration of unconscious transmission whereby binaries are projected and introjected, includes both the phenomena of desire implanted from the other to the emerging self, along with the instructions about what is enjoined and what is forbidden, what is sick and what is healthy.

The enigmatic message will likely come with instructions regarding what we now call heteronormativity, and like all enigmatic messages, these instructions may be replete with conflict and contradiction. I use the term "instructions" not to stress conscious awareness, rather to make contact with the writers thinking of unconscious messages transmitted in regard to life agendas, trauma, etc.

Intersectionality, which insists we situate our understanding of sexuality in the crossroads of other competing and often conflicting forces: race and class in particular. All these theories situate gender and sexuality in an intersubjective paradigm, an understanding that identity is an outcome of complex contradictions.

What makes Laplanche such an important theoretical partner for Crenshaw is his commitment to the power of the other, parental sibling, someone other than the child as a transmitter of messages (conscious and unconscious) to the child which slowly and inexorably constitute the child's sexuality and infantile unconscious sexuality as these messages are translated. This is a theory of sexuality, one of the crucial elements in Crenshaw's model, that is socially and interpersonally constituted. Laplanche offers a model of development in which the forces of history, and social experience and desire arrive inevitably to and for the child. It is a model of interpersonally-derived forms of identity that constitute a mechanism through which Crenshaw's conflicting identity experiences are instantiated in the individual child, in a way and at a stage of early helplessness and vulnerability

Here is a brief example of what this might mean.

For the purposes of thinking about intersectionality and mutual elision, we will focus on one example, taken from a woman in treatment, presumably in the 1920s. As background, here is the text from Riviere that is importantly put in question. Riviere is detailing a childhood masturbatory phantasy of the patient, whom she identifies as an American from the south:

This phantasy, it then appeared, had been very common in her childhood and youth, which had been spent in the Southern States of America; if a negro came to attack her, she planned to defend herself by making him kiss her and make love to her (ultimately so that she could then deliver him over to justice). But there was a further determinant of the obsessive behavior. In a dream which had a rather similar content to this childhood phantasy, she was in terror alone in the house; then a negro came in and found her washing clothes, with her sleeves rolled up and arms exposed. She resisted him, with the secret intention of attracting him sexually, and he began to admire her arms and to caress

them and her breasts.

(1929, p. 309)

In looking at this material now, with intersectionality and mutual elision in mind, it seems important to distinguish the agenda of the writer, Riviere, a woman in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in England not attuned to American racism in its ugliest formation. Our concern here is the amnesia in North American readers over nearly a century. Much later this paper, with its ideas of masquerade, was of interest to Lacan (1960). He too, but not surprisingly, missed the important implications about race and gender. For our purposes here, the interest is in examining the underlying message, with its complex agendas of perpetration, murderous attacks on black male sexuality and black men: all of it hidden in the interiority of a child's sexual fantasy.

## References

- Chetrit-Vatine, V. (2004). Primal seduction, matrilineal space and asymmetry in the psychoanalytic encounter. *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 85, 841-56.
- Crenshaw, K. (2011). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1231-99.
- Laplanche, J. (1997). The Theory of Seduction and the Problem of the Other. *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 78: 653-666.
- (1999) *Essays on Otherness*. London: Routledge.
- (2015). *The Temptation of Biology: Freud's Theories of Sexuality*. New York (UIT).
- Riviere, J. (1929). Womanliness as a Masquerade. *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 10, 303-313.
- Saketopoulou, A. (2014), To suffer pleasure; the shattering of the ego as the psychic lie of perverse sexuality. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 14 (3) 245-252.
- (In press), The draw to overwhelm: consent, risk and the re-translation of enigma. *J. Amer. Psychoanal.*
- Stein, R. (2007). Moments in Laplanche's Theory of Sexuality. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 8(2):177-200.
- (2008). The otherness of sexuality: Excess. *J. Amer. Psychoanal.* 56, 43-71.