



Express

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## Back On The Couch

by Courtney Fiske

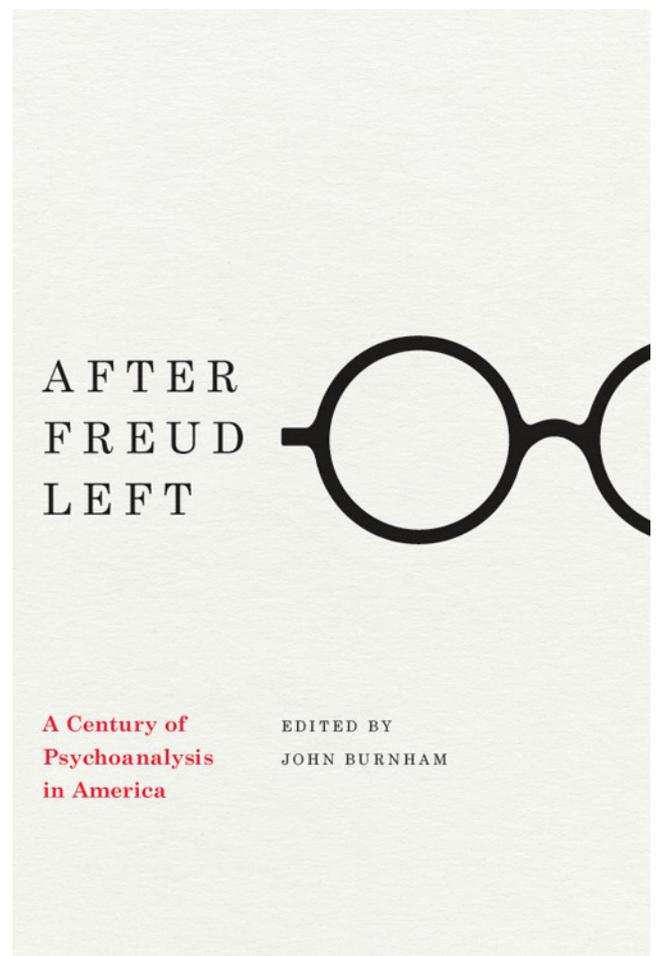
**John Burnham, Ed.**

***After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America*  
(University of Chicago Press, 2012)**

In orthodox histories, Freudianism's diffusion across the Atlantic registers as an incidental event, a footnote to the European phenomenon that was "Freud." The nine essays in *After Freud Left*, penned by a cross-section of academics and practicing psychoanalysts, seek to remedy this regnant understanding.

Editor John Burnham makes his claim boldly in the collection's opening pages: far from an addendum, America was the nation where Freud's insights enjoyed the greatest cultural purchase and the most enduring institutional embrace.

Burnham's contention seems slightly inflated, and the anthology lacks the Continental case studies necessary to qualify his superlatives. Such embellishments aside, *After Freud Left* makes a much needed intervention into the historical record, revealing the eclectic and incongruous ways in which Freud's ideas migrated stateside. Proceeding chronologically, its essays chart a narrative of rise, climax, and decline, bookended by either end of the 20th century. Marked by their revisionist bent, the anthology's authors use psychoanalysis as a lens through which to examine disparate historical and intellectual trends. The results are often less about Freud than the cultural moment his ideas inhabited.



The collection opens with Freud's first, and only, visit to America. Carting Carl Jung—then an unwavering disciple—in tow, Freud passed the better part of September 1909 at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he gave a series of lectures on sexuality, slips, and dreams. While most narratives pinpoint this visit as the moment of psychoanalysis's American arrival, historians Sonu Shamdasani and Richard Skues question the textbook dogma. At the time, both authors stress, American psychology was less a streamlined discipline than a jumbled field populated by an array of indistinct theories. The boundaries of psychoanalysis having yet to be drawn, Freud was seen as one figure among many, his speeches at Clark University notable mainly for their inconspicuousness. Their importance lay not in their delivery but in their publication the following year, which made Freud's thinking accessible for the first time to an Anglophone audience. Possessed of a previously lacking coherence, psychoanalysis—formally codified with Freud's founding of the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1910—began to establish its hermeneutic clout.

The remaining essays chronicle a success that was, by all accounts, improbable. Psychotherapist Ernst Falzeder considers Freud's caustic, and continually aired, contempt for all things American. While anti-Americanism was typical among Central European intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century, Freud's aspersions were particularly pointed. America, in Freud's caricature, was a country of unfeeling materialists, sanctimonious prudes, and impudent hypocrites. His sojourn at Clark only upped his vitriol: an escalation provoked, Falzeder speculates, by Freud's need to distance himself from the seductions of American capitalism.

If Freud's antipathies did little to impede the spread of his ideas stateside, neither did the incompatibility of his theories with ingrained assumptions about the American self. Freud's pessimism—his conviction that the warring factions within the mind could achieve, at best, a partial accord—contravened Americans' easy optimism. While unhappiness was congenial to Freudian man, America (at least in theory) was a land of expanding frontiers where existential fulfillment was always within reach, provided that one worked hard enough. Freud's resignation clashed with Americans' abiding faith in self-improvement: their belief that every man was his own maker, regardless of the civilizational constraints that bound him. Yet, as the contributors to this volume stress, psychoanalysis did not come to America as an unfiltered, hermetic whole. Rather, from the moment of its arrival, Freudianism was bound up and in American culture. This Americanized Freud was not singular, but multiple, his teachings recalibrated to the demands of a novel social and intellectual context.

In one of the anthology's strongest essays, historian Elizabeth Lunbeck traces the history of Freud's American glosses. In the first decade of the 20th century, neurologist James Jackson Putnam, Freud's inaugural American acolyte, leavened psychoanalysis's gloom with his faith in the possibility of harmonious integration between man and society. Hitler's rise to power brought two waves of *émigré* analysts to New York City: the first, in the early 1930s from Berlin; the second, in 1938 from Vienna. Here, the Viennese, ever faithful to Freud, contended with heterodox Americans and Berliners who hoped to purge psychoanalysis of its founder's shadow. Yet, by 1945, such attempts to make Freud's theories less metaphysical and more scientific had lost out to the orthodoxy of the

Viennese. Vienna-born Heinz Hartmann's accession to the helm of the New York Psychoanalytic Society secured the prominence of ego psychology, a therapeutic method more stringent, in many ways, than Freud's own. Freudian man resolved into the model of the modernist hero, seeing through civilization's thin veneer and facing the chaos within.

Together with Freud's death in 1939, Hartmann's hegemony cleared space for schisms. Lunbeck attends to one such dissident, Heinz Kohut, himself a Vienna transplant. Fleeing the Continent on the heels of the Anschluss, Kohut came to Chicago via London, where he deferred to ego psychology's reigning conservatism. Kohut's break came in the late '60s, when, in a series of papers, he attacked the foundations of Freud's metapsychology, challenging the primacy of the drives and rejecting Freud's designation of narcissism as a pathology. While Freud had dismissed *amour propre* as an infantile indulgence, Kohut championed self-concern as the linchpin of mature, robust personhood. It was here that Kohut's revisionism met widespread concerns about what Lunbeck terms "the modal American self." To contemporary social critics, Kohut's "healthy narcissism" was nothing more than thinly veiled vainglory: the psychoanalytic analog of what Tom Wolfe would term, in his 1976 *New York* magazine cover story, the "Me Decade." Narcissism emptied into an omnibus term, at once lauded as a boon to self-esteem and disparaged as a herald of America's imminent decline. As Lunbeck deftly illuminates, Kohut's new discipline of "self psychology" epitomized the heterogeneity of late-20th century Freudianism, whose cultural prominence came at the expense of doctrinal purity.

Kohut's optimism did much to make psychoanalysis palatable to an American audience, the "Me Decade" marking the height of America's infatuation with Freud. Writer and academic Louis Menand skillfully weighs another aspect of this vogue for psychoanalysis: the Cold War culture of anxiety, fed by an unlikely alliance of Freudian theory, European existentialism, and big pharma. Rooting his discussion in W. H. Auden's book-length poem, *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), Menand illuminates how the prevalence of battle trauma during World War II, and the attendant legitimization of stress-related disorders, enabled psychoanalysis's rapid popularization in the postwar decades. In his 1950 tome, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, American psychologist Rollo May joined Freud's notion of anxiety as fear of the libido to Søren Kierkegaard's understanding of dread as constitutive of the human condition. Taken in this compound form, anxiety appeared as the very condition of modernity. To be modern, Menand paraphrases, was to experience anxiety: a mood which, in the wake of World War II, constituted its own medical category, complete with pharmaceutical remedy.

Such hybridizations of Freud's theories would spell their demise. The advent of psychoactive drugs in the late '60s pushed psychoanalysis to the periphery of medical practice, as somatic etiologies prevailed over psychological explanations. As historian Dorothy Ross documents, Freud's adoption by '60s radicals in the name of free love diminished the heroic version of Freud, stoically confronting the abyss within, whom postwar intellectuals had lionized. Freud's fate was entangled with the modernism he so epitomized, and as modernism's fortunes dwindled, so did his. Feminist expositions of the chauvinism underpinning Freud's developmental scheme made the Herr Doctor

seem a domineering sexist, far from the iconoclast whom an earlier avant-garde had embraced. Menand designates the publication of DSM-III in 1980, which all but excised the term “neurosis” from its diagnostic lexicon, as the final stage in Freud’s defeat. Once the core of American psychiatric practice, psychoanalysis was relegated to the fringes of film and literature departments. Cloistered within academia, Freud became an anachronism.

*After Freud Left’s* ambition to parse ten decades of American psychoanalysis in 200-odd pages means that certain key aspects of Freud’s transmission stateside are neglected. The years between Freud’s Clark lectures and the Anschluss are largely ignored. Betty Friedan and Kate Millet receive mention only in passing: an omission that leaves feminism’s central role in Freud’s *coup de grâce* wholly understated. Lacking, too, is an adequate discussion of American postmodernism which, when invoked, appears as a blanket term for the intellectual climate of the ’80s and ’90s. One wonders, as well, how those essays devoted to Freudianism’s decline could fail to bring Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, translated into English in 1978, to bear.

The anthology’s aim, however, is not to be encyclopedic. Its essays are at their best when they reveal the extent to which new times called for new Freuds. Reminding us of the fluidity of our conceptions of self, each author recalls how distinct historical actors manipulated Freudian thought to satisfy the needs of their politics and their moment. If Freud’s model of the psyche seems today a muted presence, perhaps, as Burnham suggests, it is because its tenets have been so thoroughly assimilated, its challenge to the way in which we understand ourselves and others so internalized as to be untraceable.

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#### CONTRIBUTOR

Courtney Fiske

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#### RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



## About Last Night

by Jeff Tompkins

FEB 2015 | MUSIC

The first pages of the Library of America’s new collection make it clear that when Virgil Thomson was named head music critic of the New York Herald Tribune in the fall of 1940, he came in spoiling for a fight.



# The Myth of a Post-Racial America

by Jill Dehnert

**DEC 14-JAN 15 | BOOKS**

Within the first pages of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine establishes, through personal anecdote told in the second person, the themes that will be explored in the book: race, privilege, public versus private persona, memory and most ubiquitously, language, or, more specifically, the power of language both to construct and deconstruct personhood.

# The Place of Storms

by Wolfgang Hilbig, translated from the German by Isabel Fargo Cole

**OCT 2015 | FICTION**

from the collection *The Sleep of the Righteous* out now from Two Lines Press

We could claim but a small part of the street: our street, as we called it, stretched toward to the point where the pavement began—uneven and jolting, made of square granite cobbles—and out the other way to the railroad crossing, where the town, at least its inhabited part, really had already ended.

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by Williams Cole

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