What is the unconscious?

John Farnsworth

Psychotherapist, Dunedin

Abstract

The unconscious may seem a simple concept. This paper draws on recent literature to argue that, not only is it deceptively complex, but it is also a concept undergoing constant transformation and contestation. The paper demonstrates this by exploring several dimensions that shape current understanding and use. They encompass the early philosophy and history of the unconscious in shaping ideas of the modern Western self, and how, more recently, the concept has been constantly reworked and contested as a computational model in social psychology and neuroscience. A further dimension outlines profound counter-discourses of the unconscious, articulated primarily through the indigenous, and through postcolonial and anthropological studies. A third aspect discusses what is counted as evidence of the unconscious and how this shapes its understanding. The paper draws on the literature of intergenerational transmission to illustrate how these dimensions overlap and how they both shape, and are shaped by the complex embodied experience of individual and collective unconscious processes.

Whakarāpopotonga

Tērā te pōhēhē he ariā ngāwari noa iho te ariā mauri moe. E huri ana tēnei pepe ki ngā tuhinga o kō tonu ake nei ki te tautohe i tua atu i te kore e kitea o tōna hōhonutanga, he ariā kore e mutu te nekeneke me te tautohetohea. Ka tūhurahia ētahi huarahi whakaahunga mātauranga, whakamahi hoki hei whakaatu atu. Ka whakaurua mai ngā rapunga whakaaro ngā hītori tawhito whakapā atu ki te hinengaro, te hangana huatau whaiora o te tangata hauāuru hou, ā, e whakamahia haere tonuhia e tautohea tonuhia ana hei whakaahua tātai i roto i te hāpori hinengaro tangata me te pūtaiao. Arā atu anō tētahi wāhanga e whakaara kōrero rerekē atu e pā ana ki te mauri moe ahu mai ai i te nuinga o te wā mai i te tangata whenua me ngā rangahautanga mō te tangata whenua me ōna rangahautanga tikanga. Ka matapakia te mea e aroa ana hei tohu mo te mauri moe te huanga ake o tōna mātatauranga. Ka whāia ngā tuhinga e pā ana ki ngā kōrero tukua iho hei whakaahua i te pūtahitanga o ēnei ariā, ā, ō rāua āhua, te whakaahuatanga tahitia e ngā waiora hōhonu o te kotahi me te hātepe huinga mauri moe.

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Introduction

> Over the ensuing several sessions, these traumatic family experiences were explored. Celine called the constellation of unspoken family trauma, the "Big Family Secret". As she began to speak about knowing the Big Family Secret, she felt anger for the silencing of it. She began to make links to her own inexplicable lifelong anxiety, the silenced experiences of parental trauma, and the alien within. The alien living inside was becoming known. At one point she made the direct connection between the alien and the mother's unspoken trauma. (Knight, 2017, p. 121)

What is the unconscious? This simple question, so central for analysts and psychotherapists, turns out to be surprisingly difficult to answer. Yet most practitioners would immediately recognise its powerful impact in the passage above. They would also recognise its silent, sinuous passage through Celine's generations. I return to this below.

How, though, would they recognise the following passage?

> the Qur'anic therapist who has been a pivotal interlocutor in my ethnography over many years formulates the concept of "soul choking" (taḍyīq al-nafs) — a kind of medical–spiritual phenomenology of the soul, inspired by the Qur'anic depiction of the "constriction" and "expansion" of the nafs [soul] as an opening or sealing of the heart to the knowledge and the path of God. (Pandolfo, 2018, p. 8)

This passage also articulates intergenerational transmission, but in a formulation and style so alien to much western psychotherapy that it demands some introduction. Its implications are central to a variety of radical accounts of the unconscious I develop later around the sensual and sensate, the cultural and postcolonial. Here, Stefanie Pandolfo speaks to an unconscious grounded in the collective, the spiritual and the cultural, articulated as much through the interpretative social sciences as through psychology. Its Islamic voice heralds a mode of unconscious communication profoundly at odds with conventional Western scientific discourse (Berardi, 2021). As I outline in later sections, such modes unsettle customary ideas about unconscious process. They also resonate with challenges to an increasingly cybernetic, neuroscientific approach to the mind that I explore below. Yet, each perspective articulates in its own language the ideas of intergenerational transmission, suffering and the unconscious which I have already introduced.

What do such perspectives offer practitioners, to whom this paper is addressed? I argue that it opens up alternative ways of encountering this disturbing figure, the unconscious. Doing so widens the therapeutic frames we bring to bear in clinical practice. Indeed, the very term, 'the' unconscious implies it is a single, timeless idea, one founded in Freud's original thinking. That, in fact, is far from the truth, as the examples below will illustrate.

Instead, this review essay describes the evolution of the unconscious not as timeless but

as subject to constant transformation and contestation. Conceived well before Freud (Ffytche, 2011, p.284), the unconscious has continued to develop through two, largely incompatible, forms of existence.1 One form involves an increasingly scientific passage through social psychology and, currently, neuroscience. I draw on Weinberger and Stoycheva's *The Unconscious* (2019) as a way to illustrate these developments. Yet, the dominant assumptions of this scientific project have attracted sharp responses and divergent alternatives, and I take these up in a section that follows. The other perspective investigates unexamined Western assumptions through the critical social sciences: it does so primarily by way of non-Western, cultural and, often, politically postcolonial investigation. Ironically, some of these traditions were alive in the West long before the arrival of psychoanalysis (Ellenberger, 1970; el Shakry, 2018).

Both perspectives are incompatible in another important way: what each counts as evidence. In the scientific version, evidence is quantitative, data-driven and increasingly microscopic, often shaped by the demands of psychology and neuroscience. It may, or may not, include direct reference to the unconscious (Cook et al, 2017). By contrast, sociocultural enquiry, typically encompassing the social sciences, anthropology and psychotherapy, emphasises qualitative material: subjective experience and the interpretation of what the significance of these patterns of experience might mean (e.g. Lee et al, 2021).

The consequence of both approaches has been a vast and constantly expanding literature (e.g. Smith et al, 2021). In the last five years of book publication alone, the unconscious is interpreted as interpersonal, capitalist, geographical, political, postcolonial, optical, new, aesthetic, transnational, internet, environmental and 'third'. To prevent the reader being engulfed in a tide of references, this paper restricts itself, as best it can, to representative samples. What is significant, however, is that what counts as evidence is crucial to such an elusive concept as the unconscious. How do we detect what, by definition, is out of conscious awareness? Commonly, it is registered by means of proxies (e.g. Yakushko et al, 2016) and that takes up some of the discussion here.

Intergenerational transmission: Celine and the big family secret

If we return to Celine's experience described by Knight (2017) above, we can begin to understand it from both the perspectives I outlined. From the first, the alien within, and the Big Family Secret, clearly involve unconscious or repressed experience. These aspects articulate Celine's individual suffering. Yet, it is also suffering experienced long before, by way of trauma across generations. In this case, it is identified with Celine's mother. Such patterns of suffering are often verified through intergenerational investigation: the intensive accumulation of 'hard' data, such as trauma metastudies (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Intergenerational transmission cross-culturally requires ethnography and careful interpretative work to make sense of what is being presented (Gibbon & Lamoreaux, 2021). Suffering, too, is often picked up by therapists as sensate evidence; a 'felt' presence as Knight herself does in this piece.

Of course, Celine's experience and her Big Family Secret don't, on the face of it, appear 'cultural', but that depends on how 'cultural' is translated through Western or non-Western

frames of reference. Writers such as Ethan Watters (2011), for instance, describe the powerful cultural shaping and export of mental illness, such as anorexia, from the west to Hong Kong, where it was formerly unknown. Equally, seen through a different lens, Celine's 'alien within' would be understood in earlier Western history as a form of possession;[2] possession is equally familiar within a range of non-Western contexts as the Pandolfo quotation suggests (Anderson et al, 2011; Herzog, 2016).

Lastly, Celine's unconscious is indicated through proxies: for instance, her incomprehensible lifelong anxiety is a signal of the unconscious but an unarticulated one. It is only when it is translated as "the silenced experiences of parental trauma" (Knight, 2017, p. 121), an interpretative move, that meaning emerges. This is how such social science research identifies evidence: consistent patterns which, otherwise, would remain silent and invisible.

How did we get to such a complicated place when considering the seemingly simple unconscious? Weinberger and Stoycheva (2019) answer the question through contemporary Western psychology and neuroscience.

The unconscious in Weinberger and Stoycheva (2019)

What is the unconscious for Weinberger and Stoycheva? It is "normatively arational, unconscious, and can be flawed without our realizing it" (2019, p. 4). This working definition allows them to ask a question which might surprise psychoanalysts:

> Did we develop sophisticated methods of exploring the "subterranean of the mind" in the 20th century? In a word, no. Not only did advances in understanding unconscious processing not match the revolutionary growth of the physical and natural sciences of Bergson's time, the 20th century did not offer a unified (let alone accepted) view of unconscious events. (Weinburger & Stoycheva, 2019, p.7)

In their view, such study really arrived only in the 21st century with computational models and the detailed study of massive modularity, parallel distributed processing and neural modularity (Weinberger & Stoycheva, 2019, p. 6). These models are distant to everyday clinical practice but they do represent current research science. Such models also expand what counts as unconscious: not simply the arational or the repressed, but routine lightning-fast neurological processes, which enables us to cross the road, choose our next spoken words, drive with relative safety, digest our food or pick out a conversation in a crowd: everything, in effect, which we take for granted in daily functioning.

These are generally of less interest to psychotherapists, but for neuroscientists in particular they exert a continuing fascination. Such processes form a massive model of parallel neural processing that takes place, seamlessly, out of awareness (Benjamin et al, 2020).

To arrive at this point, Weinberger and Stoycheva chart the long road from the pre-conscious to the present. They trace, for instance, psychology's emergence from a philosophy of the subject rooted in Romanticism and German idealism. Here, in parallel with Henri Ellenberger's earlier and magisterial *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970), they outline two

"models of the mind" (2019, p. 23) developed in the era of Dynamic Psychiatry from 1775 onwards. In these models the conscious and the non-conscious alternate, as earlier ideas of possession gave way to animal magnetism, hypnotism and somnambulism, representing "a clash between supernatural Baroque and rational Enlightenment" ideas (2019, p. 20). The book recounts the emergence of psychologists who, from the 1870s and 1880s, sought instead, "a laboratory-based, experimental foundation" for the unconscious (2019, p. 23). In many ways, these became the tensions that Freud attempted to navigate, depicting psychoanalysis on the one hand as a scientific method yet, on the other, one that could interpret powerful individual and collective urges and how these were repressed (Freud, 2006).

Weinberger and Stoycheva outline what became an unending struggle during this era and beyond. Philosophical debate circulated around a new concept of the self and, along with it, tensions between its conscious and unconscious expression. Equally, the idea of the self emerged through the new European middle-class, constituted through the new practices of "self-talk" in France (Goldstein, 2008). These practices themselves reflected massive social change as rural, aristocratically-controlled communities gave way to the rise of the urban, commercial metropolis and to new forms of private and public behaviour (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 183; Sennett, 1977). These new 'rational' selves of the emerging consumer were undermined either by atavistic, impulsive urges, or by powerful, non-rational sentiments towards others or nature. It was this that exercised philosophers including Fichte, Schlegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer and Neitzsche amongst others, who attempted to account for the balance between conscious and unconscious forces (Ffytche, 2011). For instance, von Hartmann, in his popular *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1884), took up Schopenhauer's argument for a blind driving force ("will") that permeated the universe. Nietzsche extended these ideas, in advance of Freud, defining the mind as:

> a seething cauldron of complementary and contradictory similar ideas, an arena of confused thoughts, emotions, and instincts. It is the realm of wild, brutal instincts derived from the early stages of individual and species development. (Weinberger & Stoycheva, 2019, p. 13)

Neitzsche went on to coin the term "the it" (das es) which Freud took over as the id (Weinberger and Stoycheva 2019, p.13), the source of the impersonal, irrational unconscious.

Against this, however, the rise of academic psychology, coupled with an insistence on positive measurement (as Positivism), was to reject altogether "the existence or importance of unconscious processes" (Weinberger & Stoycheva, 2019, p. 29). The earlier tensions, then, translate into battles that see the idea of the psyche, let alone the unconscious, rise and fall from favour, most famously obliterated in Watson and Skinner's post-World War II behaviorist theories (Schneider and Morris 1987).

The psychoanalytic legacy occupies two chapters in *The Unconscious*, with scant reference to Jung and none to Lacan. Instead, it refers to six major schools, 'classical psychoanalysis, ego psychology, object relations, self psychology...and relational psychoanalysis.' Since 'Ego psychology and classical theory have more or less merged,' 'we treat them as one' (Weinberger & Stoycheva, 2019, p. 38).

By contrast, the second part of *The Unconscious* traces the rise of experimentalism in psychology, which attempted to specify unconscious processes with great exactitude. Two developments are notable. One was the sheer volume, and ingenuity, of experimental work. This "veritable explosion" of studies (Weinberger and Stoycheva 2019, p. 60) included word association tests, subliminal and unconscious defensive strategies, how individuals avoided taboo or suggestive words, priming studies and much else. They strengthened the claim to a scientific approach, and one which privileged definable, large-scale data.

The second development came by redefining the unconscious; first, as "automatic processing", "subception", or subliminal activation; later, through concepts such as cognitive dissonance, attribution theory, bystander intervention or expectancy studies (2019, pp. 111–120). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the unconscious becomes increasingly alienated from itself and atomised into discrete components that can be microscopically examined.

Such discrete components form a relatively short step towards constructing computer models of the mind subsequently explored through neuroscience. Increasingly, these models depict the brain as a biological machine with numerous modules, massive high-speed parallel processing and a complex neural architecture (e.g. Dehaene, 2023). One such illustration, drawing on earlier ideas of the self is, for instance, Northoff and Schaefer's influential *Who Am I: The Conscious and the Unconscious Self* (2017). Such complex models of the mind still grapple with issues of self, inner experience and unconscious process as demonstrated, for example, in Antonia Damasio's work (2018). Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that there are currently "at least twenty-two supported neurobiological explanations" for the basis of consciousness alone (Friedman et al, 2023, p. 345).

An alternative tradition rethinks such cybernetic issues from its very origins. The French Groupe de Dix, containing "some of France's most original and ambitious thinkers" (Dicks, 2019, p. 170) rejected the premises of the post-war American Cybernetics Group out of which the neuroscience tradition developed. The Groupe de Dix flatly contradicted Norbert Weiner's seminal analogy between cybernetic machines and living beings as wrong in concept (Dicks, 2019, p. 170). The brain was not a kind of (cybernetic) machine, a parallel processing technology different to anything in nature. On the contrary, the natural world itself provided radical models far more supple and far-reaching than cybernetics could offer, such as Maturana and Varela's ground-breaking work on autopoesis (1973). They studied self-production across every form of ecosystem, including human societies. This approach subsumed the human within the natural, not the other way round, nor as standing against it. This challenge led to "a radical re-thinking of three fields largely neglected by the Cybernetics Group: physics, philosophy and poetics" (Dicks, 2019, p. 171) and has paved the way for ideas of the machinic unconscious.

In short, these perspectives provided a groundwork to radically rethink the unconscious. First, by linking the unconscious to the non-human, anticipated by Henri Bergson (1911) and through later developments in critical theory. Secondly, by offering profound flesh-and-blood encounters familiar to therapeutic practice in the overlap of anthropology and psychoanalysis.

The machinic unconscious

Weinberger and Stoycheva depict the brain as a biological machine, but the autopoetic tradition and its alternatives frame the brain within a vastly wider canvas. This canvas encompasses the whole impersonal universe as a set of dynamic systems, from the molecular (viruses and cellular organisms) to the macroscopic (weather patterns, sea currents or galaxies). These often unstable systems shape, from a human perspective, how we experience reality (Prigogine & Stengers, 2017). They also depict the brain and body itself as simply a set of complex machines out of our awareness; the machinic unconscious. As Michel Serres (1982, p.81) writes:

> The body is an extraordinarily complex system that creates language from information and noise… And this holds true whether I describe the system in terms of chemistry, physics, thermodynamics, or information theory, and whether I situate myself as the final receptor of an integrated apparatus.

The important implication is that the unconscious is now impersonal — machinic. It is also trans-species: viral, cellular or mammalian, each species in a constant process of competition or collaboration, often entirely out of our awareness. Consequently, these traditions rethink experience and unconscious activity in unimagined ways (Neidich, 2014).

For instance, new digital developments enlarge how we can understand the psyche: the creation of digital organisms, computer immune systems, artificial protocells, evolutionary robotics, and swarm systems potentially reimagine both the human and the machinic unconscious (Johnson, 2010).

For this generation of thinkers, such as Serres, everything becomes a signal, much broader than Freud's original signal anxiety. Such sensory signals communicate autonomic, neurophysiological and social cues similar to those identified in polyvagal theory (Porges, 2021). In this tradition, Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) create a spectacular image of the unconscious, translating Freud's *id* into an organic, entirely impersonal *it*:

> It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits and fucks. What a mistake to have ever said the id … The mouth of the anorexic wavers between several functions: its possessor is uncertain as to whether it is an eating-machine, an anal machine, a talking-machine, or a breathing machine (asthma attacks). Hence we are all handymen: each with his little machines. (p. 1)

Their unconscious is both global and "machinic". Coupling it with an excoriating critique of an impersonal capitalist order producing endless psychic distress, they paint the unconscious as an implacable force of a pre-personal desire which, nodding to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, runs through every system, social or biological, large or small (Marks, 2006).

Such a radical analytic theory joins with contemporary neuroscience, but in a forcefully political and critical way (Featherstone, 2020; Herzog, 2016). Significant for our purposes, however, is that these molecular forces are, increasingly, being found to shape intergenerational transmission (Branje et al, 2020), a point to which I return below.

If such machinic, impersonal models of the unconscious seem incompatible with the human-centred picture that Weinberger and Stoycheva (2019) paint, then the contrast with the cultural unconscious could hardly be sharper.

The cultural unconscious

Stefanie Pandolfo (2018) starkly illustrates the gulf: a psychoanalyst and ethnographer, she writes on 'madness' through the idioms of psychoanalysis and Islam. Madness, here:

> is the result of a slow transformation of the gaze in the give and take of my ethnographic work, which made the psyche and the psychoanalytic cure appear through the lens of the *nafs*/soul, its carnal and spiritual life, its vulnerability, and its ontology of the Invisible (*al-ghayb*). What this disclosed was not just the possibility and actual presence of a contrastive dialogue between the psychoanalytic and the Qur'anic cure, but a spiritual-metaphysical dimension of the psyche itself. (p. 3)

Pandolfo's serpentine language appeals to history, culture, difference, vulnerability, uncertainty, the spiritual, the ethnographic and to dialogue. It is written at the intersection of psyche, soul, tradition and the body: in Pandolfo's phrase, as *'ilm al-nafs*, the science of the soul. Such a framing could hardly be more different than the machinic, datafied model above. More than that, it paints a different picture of the unconscious; as the Egyptian psychoanalytic scholar, Fethi Benslama (2009) writes, drawing from accepted understandings of the medieval Sufi philosopher, Ibn 'Arabî:

> Ibn 'Arabî's unconscious is not the Freudian unconscious, even if it often comes close to it. It is the condition of the spiritual veiling and unveiling of the multiple forms of man. (p. 31)

So, is this simply a quite different *model* of the unconscious?

What I want to capture above all, as the quote does, is the experiential quality connected to the unconscious. And necessarily, this is messy, as Pondolfo acknowledges: provisional, uncertain, incomplete, suffused with feeling and shaped by personal, interpersonal, spiritual and collective resonances. As she commented,

> I set out with different questions: what is it to register an experience of madness? And how to inhabit culture in its aftermath? I met patients and psychiatrists in that suspended space, where multiple claims and voices emerged and could be heard, voices recalcitrant to description, or even inscription, which refused to occupy the place of the object of study and instead asked back troubling questions…That is a vulnerable place — and not exactly one of knowledge. (Iqbal & Pandolfo, 2022, n.p.)

Constructing the unconscious

What this mode of investigation breaks open is not simply the ambiguity of the unconscious

but the frames of reference we use in attempting to register it. What, in effect, is the very terminology we employ to identify unconscious processes? Answering questions of frame and terminology has been central in recent postcolonial anthropology — an anthropology very much alive to the damage its long colonial psychiatric history has wreaked on numerous peoples. Katie Kilroy-Marac (2019) writes vividly, for example, of the Fann Clinic in Senegal, with its forcible transportation of 'lunatics' from Senegal to Marseilles. She describes a haunting, borne of local memories, surrounding the colonial legacy of the clinic. Haunting also inhabits accounts of ethnopsychonalysis: colonial questions of whether the Dogon in Mali or Trobriand Islanders possessed an Oedipus complex (Herzog, 2016). Colonialism brought frames of reference illuminating as much about its own unconscious presumptions as it did about the peoples it was studying:

> the notions of the unconscious as a forbidden zone of irrational desire and passionate violence relied on imperial imaginings that continued to structure colonial space in starkly opposing terms. The dichotomy between the cool exterior of the autonomous bourgeois ego and the inflamed turmoil of the colonized unconscious reflected the tensions of a ''self-conscious'' European modernity that defined itself against the unchanging ''primitivism'' of non-Western civilizations. (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 3)

In response, recent postcolonial anthropology has opened up two kinds of questions, both of which concern the unconscious. One, in rejecting the colonial, asks what we understand as "reality" at all (Kohn, 2015, p. 312): how we go about "conceptualizing and composing worlds" across different societies (Morita, 2014, p. 311). Anne Salmond (2014, p. 294) illustrates these questions by drawing on contemporary debates in Aotearoa on how something as simple as fresh water is understood. She illuminates how, for te ao Māori, "people, land, waterways, and ancestors are literally bound together". Rivers act as "plaited ropes", whose currents and vortices entwine people and cosmos as a continuity (Salmond, 2014, p. 295). By contrast, for Pākehā, rivers and fresh water are, commonly, distinct entities, primarily forms of property exchange and common law (Salmond, 2014, p. 299).

It is the reflective capacity of anthropology (Morita, 2014) to bring to light what constitutes, in effect, disparate forms of unconscious that are collective. They remain unconscious, because such forms, whether Western or not, are invisible until given a vocabulary which articulates them. In this context, as writers have long emphasised, the collective unconscious trumps the individual unconscious as it has long been studied worldwide (Tubert-Oklander & Hernández-Tubert, 2021 and Jacob Moreno's investigation of collective unconscious sociometric patterns, Fleury & Knobel, 2011). Each emphasises how the individual unconscious is fused with group, family, community or the larger socius (Hopper & Weinberg, 2019). The same collective emphasis infused the work of Francois Tosquelles and the radical psychiatry movement (Robcis, 2016).

The second question postcolonial anthropology highlights is how unconscious experience undergoes continual transformation: it is not a static essence of 'the' unconscious. Herzog (2016, p. 179), for instance, lists "six or seven (if not more)" ideas about the Oedipus complex circulating in the 1960s (an inverted form in Brazil, matrilineal forms in southern Italy) (Herzog, 2016, pp. 179–211).

David Howes (n.d.) goes further to describe a reorganisation of the erotogenic zones altogether: for Trobriand Islanders, the nose replaces the genitals; "the nose, and not the oral cavity or mouth, is the primary 'erotogenic zone' of the Trobriand body" (Howes, n.d.). Consequently, the repression of sexuality and the primal scene, central to the Oedipal Complex, simply fails to function in Trobriand society. Instead, the Trobriand version "centres around 'the image of children excreting'" (Howes, 2003, p.180). By contrast, "sexual acts are not shrouded in secrecy or necessarily hidden from young eyes"; instead, "it is a source of amusement". For Howes (2003, pp. xv–xix), the key issue is how different senses shape different forms of unconscious in and across different cultures. Herzog (2016, pp. 191–192) reports a variety of different configurations across other cultures, such as the Anyi, where a constellation of primal fear or suspicion was linked directly to sanctioned early experiences of acute pain. Consequently, Batja Mesquita (2022) can show how emotions themselves, such as anger, joy or lust, are not pre-existing essences but are shaped by the relational contexts in which they take place.

The ethnographer Francois Laplantine (2015) suggests how the unconscious extends beyond the ambit of the body altogether. He writes of how the body's whole sensorium may be attuned, beyond language, through the body's multiple modes of sensory perception:

> What we might call the linguistic paradigm gives an account of only a minute part of the sensible. It does not manage even to approach that which is non-propositional, non-predicative, non-categorical in experiences such as the rhythms of dance, acts of love, modulations of voice, astonishment, surprise, enthusiasm, love at first sight. These are behaviors that are most often unconscious and involuntary, that psychoanalysis has studied through processes of transfer and counter-transfer, and which maintain great closeness to the animality within us. (p. 116)

Laplantine's choreographic model of the sensuous body challenges the Cartesian separation of mind and body. So does David Howes' multisensory ethnography (2019) which provides numerous other powerful instances: for example, where the Yirrkala people from one moiety "rub the sweat from their armpits on the eyes of the other moiety to empower the latter to 'see with sacredness'" (quoted in Howes, 2019, p. 23). Howes describes these as "audio-olfactory" and "visuo-olfactory" communication: at once chemical, aural-vibrational and visual (2019, p. 23).

The ethnographer Eduardo Kohn goes further and, by doing so, introduces the supra-human. In *How Forests Think* (2015), he entirely reworks the human/non-human divide, exploring "the interactions of humans with (and between) animals, plants, physical processes, artifacts, images, and other forms of beings" (Descola, 2013, p. 268). Kohn shifts "beyond human" and "beyond language" (Latour, 2014, p. 262). "Beyond language" recasts the whole process of symbolisation and representation — yet, not beyond meaning. Instead, communication is via the sensate: vibrations include river catchments, forests, the dead, dogs, colonial history, biological lineages, even pumas, and dreams (Latour, 2014, p. 262). Anne Salmond (2014, p. 167) explores similar extensions in Māori sensibility: "what could initially appear as animals, plants, artifacts, texts, and even landscapes are all potential candidates for relational engagement and elucidation."

At stake here is an unconscious not bounded by the body but co-extensive with the whole environment, the earth, and all its resonances. Communication is via non-symbolic forms of representation (Herrera & Palsson, 2014, p. 238). Such perspectives, and modes of being, reconfigure how illness, even psychosis, is articulated. In Vincent Ward's documentary, *Rain of the Children* (2008), the central character, Niki, diagnosed as schizophrenic, is portrayed very differently by his Tuhoe iwi:

> When you talk about *patupaiarehe* [fairies/spirits], we're talking about in Niki's case having a mental illness. We're talking about a person who hallucinates and hears voices. That's when he was getting sick from a Westernised perspective of the illness. But from a Māori perspective of the illness, he would actually see those things as being real, and so it would be cross-spoken with the elders who would understand that *patupaiarehe*, or fairies as such, were real things.

Salmond (2014) concurs in writing of Te Aitanga a Hauiti whakapapa which:

> often made it impossible to determine who was the "subject" and what was the "object" of investigation at a given moment — who or what was being compared, and on which terms. (p. 157)

These perspectives constitute "incommensurable epistemes", or frames of reference (Fisher & Hokowhitu, 2013). For Salmond (2014) and others, we are faced with profound issues of translation between different modes of being. The questions they raise are far from concluded (Kohn, 2015a), but parallel, nonetheless, the experience that Pandolfo or el Shakry describe in relation to the Islamic unconscious. Similar tensions and translations around the unconscious appear between Freud's Western vision and long-standing traditions of Muslim mysticism (el Shakry, 2017). Each asks, again, what is the unconscious and how do we know it?

Modelling the unconscious

If it were possible, how might such disparate approaches to the unconscious be reconciled? One way is to return to the question of intergenerational transmission with which I began. It combines the sensory, the somatic and the collective with the individual, and it attempts to marry two forms of evidence: intensive data gathering and broader sociocultural patterns. What it cannot do is reconcile differing modes of being or languages of representation. Attempts to do so, such as calls for global trauma response (Ratnayake et al., 2022) risk repeating the same struggles around politics and domination that Anderson et al. (2011) noted with postcolonialism.

Intergenerational transmission is a way of tracing the unconscious from the molecular to the macroscopic. It also offers possibilities for integrating aspects of the neuroscience models outlined by Weinberger and Stoycheva (2019). For instance, Branje et al (2020) describe how parenting behaviour in the next generation can be shaped by a mix of preceding genetic and family factors. This transmission blends invisible systemic markers

and human interaction across households, entangled as they are with other socioeconomic factors, "household chaos, and cultural factors" (Branje et al, 2020, p. 2). In other words, such research offers some hope for tracing complicated unconscious influences interlaced across multiple dimensions, including dysfunctional family styles (Neppl et al, 2020) or the transmission of addictions over generations (Taccini et al, 2021).

Such wide research raises the question of exactly what the term "intergenerational transmission" means. Celine's vignette, outlined at the start, illustrates individual experience. M. Gerard Fromm's moving book, *Lost in Transmission* (2012) charts it cross-nationally: depicting a disparate variety of "horror, intimacy, and uncanny re-emergence" of unspoken trauma expressed through family and communal experience. He writes how subtly it can be transmitted: "the unnamed trauma of 9/11" could be communicated to the next generation simply "by the squeeze of a hand" (Fromm, 2012, p. 71). His book also references Henry Krystal's classic work, *Massive Psychic Trauma* (1968), where Holocaust trauma is so extensive and collective it almost dwarfs the concept of the unconscious:

> The survivors form abnormal families and communities. The families tend to be sadomasochistic and affect-lame. The communities are laden with the burden of guilt and shame, and preoccupied with the past. The imprinting of inferior status can be perpetuated by a number of generations. (p. 346)

A whole nation's collective trauma can even deform language: the Chinese sign *yi* (barbarian), is one such instance; it emerged to describe the British after China's profound national shaming at Britain's hands in the 1850s (Liu, 2006).

"Intergenerational transmission", then, may describe but also struggle to encompass all the tensions around the unconscious with which we began. These are shaped, translated and even symbolised through the pressures of history and culture. As noted, Celine's experience of the "alien within" (Knight, 2017) could refer as much to the older ideas of possession recorded by Ellenberger (1970) as to current ideas of intergenerational transmission. Howes' (2019) Yirrkala people rubbing their armpits is, just as much, a form of intergenerational transmission, but it is entirely sensory. The common ground in each case points back to the rise of Western modernity, attempting to assemble post-Enlightenment ideas of self and identity, and then organising these around scientific forms of enquiry (Ellenberger, 1970). As Ffytche (2011) details, it also involved efforts to reconcile discordant ideas of rational and irrational selves in the work of Schelling, Fichte and others.

Yet, from the perspective of cultural anthropology, the West becomes just one culture amongst others, and its forms of science and evidence-gathering simply a different set of rituals (Berliner et al, 2013). It recalls the paradox expressed by the title of Bruno Latour's critique of the sciences: *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993).

Discussion

Where, then, does this leave the unconscious? What every approach acknowledges is the unconscious only becomes evident through communication, whether this is languaged, linguistic, sensorial, impersonal or cross-generational. Each approach registers this

communication through different forms of evidence; but for a practitioner, the principal concern is how it articulates expressions of suffering. Whether suffering is individual or communal, it is registered through the complex patterns of communication outlined above. Yet, so elusive is unconscious communication that, as Hadley Freeman (2023) describes, subtly gendered conditions such as anorexia sometimes defeat efforts to make sense of it.

However, psychopathology is not the only form of intergenerational transmission. In *The Ancestor Syndrome* (1998), Anne Schutzenberger traces patterns of invisible loyalties to ancestors expressed through objects, tokens or rituals spanning as far back as the Napoleonic era. Such patterns may be benign or malign but, necessarily, they are unconscious. Similarly, the unconscious permeates every aspect of contemporary life: studies of the technological unconscious, for example, (Keating, 2022; Thrift, 2004) describe how human beings are shaped by every aspect of their built and digital environment in ways of which they are rarely aware. In *Thumbelina* (2014), Michel Serres describes how these silent environments entirely reconfigure the experience and orientation of new digital generations: Thumbelina's devices make available to her "an entirely new form of cognition, one that is not tainted by the categories of thought bequeathed by Enlightenment rationality" (Howles, 2015, p.327).

There is one last perspective to consider. This has already been foreshadowed by numerous references to the spiritual. The spiritual can be aligned with non-Western or historical traditions, but there is a powerful critique which places the spiritual within Western modernity and psychology: a critique which runs from William James onwards. It argues that modern psychology is, in effect, rootless, and that psychoanalysis is itself a substitute for the spiritual — a critique which comes both from the margins (Nasr, 1994, writing on Islam) and from the centre of modernity (Oldmeadow, 2004). It is rootless, in this view, because it fails to recognise that the Greek etymology of the word "psyche" is "soul." In abandoning this recognition, Sotillos (2013) argues it has not only lost touch with humanity's spiritual essence but, worse, psychology in all its forms continues to obscure that loss. Whilst this recalls Pandolfo it is, of course, precisely the emphasis that Islamic psychoanalysis makes in celebrating the ancient writings of Ibn 'Arabî (el Shakry, 2017).

Critiques such as these highlight a final tension around the concept of the unconscious. If we accept the critique, we are confronted with a renewed struggle about spirituality, psyche and the unconscious. Has psychotherapy smuggled in the psyche, the soul, despite a modernised, bureaucratic, secularised Western society phrase (Cascardi, 1992)? Or has it foregone the capacity to reflect on the psychological dynamics of the spiritual itself? Ricouer (2008, p. 3) points to Freud's "hermeneutics of suspicion" around religious claims which he, Freud, understood as illusory. On the other hand, if we reject the spiritual critique, we are left with the dilemma that all psychologies, themselves, may simply be sophisticated, ungrounded technologies of the self. This dilemma returns us to where we began: where the concept of the unconscious arises at the same time as the formation of Western modernity. In short, we are left with a paradox which, fittingly, resembles the paradox of unconscious experience itself.

Conclusion

It is clear that unconscious processes are shaped, organised, articulated and apprehended very much according to the context in which they are situated. Cultural, social, political, neuroceptive or environmental, these contexts have one immediate implication for practitioners: the diverse settings within which their work takes place is key to how they engage with unconscious processes (Bleger, 1967). 'Setting', here, has to be understood in its most fluid sense: all the intersecting influences discussed earlier contribute to the setting and, by definition, transcend awareness. For practitioners, a major mode for sensing what is out of awareness is, paradoxically, through their own unconscious — their own elusive sensory instrument, which alerts them to the unformulated. Yet, in beginning to formulate, they themselves are subject to forms of intergenerational transmission. These are the influences of their own profession, community, culture and history which shape what remains in or out of awareness. For all these reasons, the question of the unconscious, so deceptively difficult to resolve will, most likely, continue to be.

Notes

1. Ffytche (2011, p. 274): "The conventional view of Freud is that he overturned the theory of selfhood, so that the I is no longer master in its own house; but this gesture had already been made many times throughout the nineteenth century, at the very least by Schelling, Schopenhauer, Carus and von Hartmann."
2. Ian Hacking's (2002) account of walkers' bizarre fugue states in eighteenth century Europe is such an historical illustration.

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John Farnsworth is a psychotherapist in Dunedin where he has worked in private practice for thirty years. His PhD was in cultural and organisational sociology and he has published extensively in the areas of psychotherapy, social science, ethnography, methodology and other areas.