Psychoanalytic theory about psychosexuality has been framed largely in terms of the otherness of sexuality. Freud saw the Id, the cauldron of the sexual drive, as essentially unknown to us (Freud, 1940). The Id was at once a universal structural element and an unruly force within the psyche that we relate to as a foreign element.

Hence, the strangeness of desire became psychoanalytic text. And since Fairbairn (1944) introduced the primacy of the drive for relating, the alterity of the Id folded into the search to decode the mystery of the Other (Laplanche, 1997). Contemporary theorists have taken up the appeal of otherness in sexuality as a bid for relationship that is predicated on alterity, excess, and difference. (Mitchell, 1997; Stein, 1998; Laplanche, 1997)

Qualities of otherness are certainly important aspects of sexuality. But I suggest that alterity is always in dialectic with another, undertheorized aspect of sexuality, that of the movement back toward dedifferentiation. One of the primary movements of psychosexuality is toward merger, unity, and the falling away of boundaries between self and other. Sexuality is in pulsation between an encounter with the Other and the dismantling of the boundary between self and other.
There is a pulsation between the eros of difference and the pull to merger; between the qualities of sexuality that make it excitingly other and those that move toward union. Adult sexuality inevitably expresses our wish to return back, to move backward in developmental time, through Oedipal differentiation, the stages and zones of infantile sexuality, to prenatal states of monadic merger, and back even further to an experience of oneness. While this aspect of sexuality has been approached by theorists from Freud on, it has not been well developed or consolidated. In this paper, I intend to use the theory of Ignacio Matte Blanco as scaffolding to develop the idea of the central importance of experiences of union in sexuality.

I want to make clear two premises I’m working with. First, I’m assuming that even in 2012 a theory of psychosexuality might still be of interest. Andre Green (1995) famously lamented the decline in thinking about sexuality in psychoanalysis, which increasingly privileges object relations theories, and I am following his lead in arguing for the central structural and dynamic relevance of sexuality in psychic life. In our enthusiasm for developmental theories, sexuality can often seem to fade in importance. Reasserting the primacy of sexuality is an idea whose time has come again.

Sexuality has some characteristics that make it quite contemporary. First, it occupies the area of overlap between the mind and the body, what Freud called the erogenous borderland. Sexuality is a quality of psychophysical energy, that which animates human becoming. It is infinitely pliable and expressive, the canvas for all kinds of postmodern expressions of power and play. So, just as sexuality divides us
into sexualities, it is something we implicitly share, an experience that we all partake of, and sometimes an experience of transcendence of ordinary reality.

We are all set in motion as incarnated human beings by sexual desire and intercourse of one sort or another. Sylvia Plath (1963) said, “Love set you going like a fat gold watch.” Well, it may or may not be love, but some sort of primal scene is the first act of creation, and this sexual energy propels physical and psychic development. In addition to being an energy (which is not quite the same thing as a drive), I am assuming that sexuality centrally contributes to the structuring of the psyche. Along with relationships with attachment figures, sexuality lays the foundation for the unfolding development of the mind, which occurs in tandem with the experiences of the body. Thus, for example, powerful visceral experiences of incorporation, taking something in from the outside, mark what Freud called the oral stage. This becomes a prototype experience for later relationships to taking in from outside, perhaps in greedy desperation, or perhaps with a feeling of hatred for what is lacking and therefore needed. I am also assuming that sexuality manifests differently at different levels of consciousness. Psychosexuality includes but is not limited to adult sexuality, infantile sexuality, and experiences such as creative, aesthetic, or spiritual states. Perhaps the energy of psychosexuality is at work in subtle shifts of consciousness. None of this is to deny the vital importance of our relationships and attachments, but only to say that psychosexuality is also powerfully at work.

The second premise that I want to make explicit has to do with the role of development in the psyche. Many of our psychoanalytic theories are developmental,
that is to say, stories about how minds develop in the context of growth over time and in relation to important others. I certainly don’t want to challenge the vital importance of development or object relations and their vicissitudes, but rather I’m suggesting that development always runs perpendicular to another axis. So if development is a sort of x-axis, a factor of life lived in time, I’m focusing on the y-axis, which is always present too, and in dialogue with the x-axis. (show Figure 1a here, showing x-axis and y-axis). I’ll call this y-axis consciousness, (which I mean to include many strata of conscious and unconscious mind), and I will try to describe it in this paper. For now let me say that this consciousness axis does not exist in the world of linear time, and in fact at this level we are always experiencing and exhibiting many layers of both development and consciousness at the same time. On this y-axis consciousness, we are taking out the elements of time and change (since there is no time in the unconscious, Freud (1900) tells us). Instead we might think of the mind as existing in layers, as Freud did in the topographic model. The ideas of Matte Blanco are structural in this way, and do not take up the process of development. This allows us a freedom to imagine that the psyche is not only a product of our individual human situation, but that it can stretch much farther than developmental models alone can account for.

I’ll say a few things about this y-axis, consciousness, which Matte Blanco explores in his theory. There is a feeling of energy here, and the way it is patterned, that I think may correlate in some ways with Freud’s idea of drive. As Freud so brilliantly explored, we have very different levels of consciousness, from this conscious everyday world, and into the strange and mysterious world of the
unconscious that we are privileged to explore. Theorists like Winnicott (1962), Ogden (1992), and Bion (1962) describe the importance of other levels of consciousness such as the interpenetrating mix-up of the mother/infant unit, autistic/contiguous states, and O, the outer limit of consciousness. (show Fig 1b: same as above but adding strata of y-axis, and then those of x-axis).

So, as we go through life, it is as though we are always playing chords made up of different notes, from different levels of consciousness. We are aware of these notes sometimes singly, but most often in ever shifting combinations that feel and sound different. This y-axis, consciousness, has many layers, and something is always happening at each layer, producing a note. (Show Fig. 1c, same as above but with notes/chords playing). These notes play together with soft or loud notes from other layers. Some of these chords are harmonious and pleasurable, while others are a source of suffering. We all tend toward certain notes and chords, shaped in part by development. But when we get stuck with a bad song, we may come to see an analyst. From this point of view the goal of analysis is to develop flexibility and range in the chords we can play, so that we have access to all 88 keys, and a feeling of choice and pleasure in the music. According to this model we don’t privilege development (or regression), but rather we find beauty in the shimmering interpenetration of many combinations of notes. In our clinical work, we intuitively work with this descriptively. For example, we may say to someone, “I notice that you just smiled and agreed with what I said, but I had the feeling that another part of you is angry and despairing that I will ever understand you.” Here we are describing a chord struck between conscious acquiescence and unconscious rage, and I think
most of us know the feeling of that disharmony. Over time we also explore how this particular chord developed, including the relational and libidinal glue that holds it in place.

**Matte Blanco**

In order to elaborate my ideas, I need to explain a bit about Matte Blanco. Ignacio Matte Blanco was born in 1908 in Chile, and was educated in the US and in Europe. In addition to his training in psychoanalysis, he also did advanced study in mathematical logic, and applying that logic to psychoanalysis is at the heart of his work (Rayner, 1995). Matte Blanco’s theory, which he calls bi-logic, is primarily a theory of the nature of the unconscious, and its structure and process. He follows Freud’s early work on the nature of the unconscious precisely, particularly his characterization of the unconscious as marked by five characteristics: timelessness, displacement, condensation, replacement of external by internal reality, and absence of mutual contradiction (Freud, 1900, 1915). Strikingly, though, Matte Blanco’s bi-logic has almost nothing to say about sexuality, and does not see it as integral to the nature of the unconscious, as Freud does. Part of my hope for this paper is to see what happens when we bring sexuality to Matte Blanco, what kind of intercourse might be had?

Matte Blanco posits two fundamental modes of human perception. In asymmetry, differences are noted, and discriminations are made. (Show Fig. 2a, illustrating asymmetry). We say bigger or smaller, more or less, open or closed, before or after. This is the foundation of ordinary conscious logical thought. Our everyday conscious mind is primarily concerned with asymmetry: differences,
distinctions, and comparisons. This is roughly equivalent to Freud’s secondary process, and it dominates the conscious mind. (Fig. 2b, showing symmetry).

The unconscious mind, on the other hand, is dominated by symmetry, the perception of sameness. Matte Blanco says that the unconscious can treat logically asymmetrical thoughts as though they were symmetrical, the same (Matte Blanco, 1975). He calls this process of selectively ignoring differences and seeing similarities, symmetrization. Symmetrical experience is felt more emotionally, and is in the service of recognition of likeness, commonality, oneness. In the symmetrical unconscious we perceive no difference, no time, no space, no mutual contradiction. These are Freud’s marks of the unconscious, and also characteristics of Matte Blanco’s symmetrical mode; in addition, they are characteristics we can see in emotional life. For example, at an unconscious level we might feel that all authority figures want to dominate us. In the sway of this symmetrization we are led to treat a whole class of people, authority figures, as if they were the same, and we find ourselves having the same emotional reactions to dissimilar situations.

The unconscious also does trade in asymmetry, and we might even say that splitting is asymmetry gone too far in the unconscious (Rayner, 1995). Matte Blanco calls his investigation into the highly complex, dynamic mental structures that result from the various patterns of symmetry and asymmetry, bi-logic. Matte Blanco does much more to explicate his bi-logical theory of the nature of the unconscious that I can’t develop here. Instead I want to explore how Matte Blanco’s compelling, beautiful, and spiritually sophisticated theory can be connected to libido, the body, and sexuality. Matte Blanco also has no theory of development. And yet, his ideas
about symmetrical and asymmetrical bi-logic make a rich contribution to our understanding of sexuality.

**Bi-Sexuality: Developing Matte Blanco**

So let’s put Matte Blanco’s bi-logical ideas about asymmetry and symmetry next to those of developmental theories of sexuality. Here is my rather fanciful riff. The infant emerges from the primarily symmetrical environment of the womb into a world of increasing asymmetries. In order to begin to navigate her environment, the baby must develop the capacity to distinguish one thing from another, to notice differences. The asymmetrical mode of awareness gives rise to a developing sense of me vs. not-me, inside and outside, pleasure and pain. This experience of asymmetry can be pleasurable when it is mediated by a good-enough mother (Winnicott, 1962).

Asymmetry gives rise to the sense of individuality, selfness, and also the development of a personal unconscious. Laplanche (1997) would say that the unconscious is fundamentally sexual in nature, and is formed in response to the erotic situation the infant finds herself in, with the mother. And so there is a sense that the personal unconscious arises out of a primordial, trans-consciousness, which I will describe in more detail later. The personal unconscious is first shaped out of trans-consciousness by somatic and relational experience, including the erotic enigma of the early mother.

Asymmetry also inevitably tips into an experience of excess. The experience with the early mother sometimes partakes of symmetrizing, as when the mother rocks the infant to sleep, or attunes to her gestures. And yet, as Laplanche describes, the baby is also faced with the mother as different, other, bigger, and unfathomable.
Laplanche said, “The breast transmits to the child an enigmatic message and that message is sexual.” (Laplanche, 1997). This is an asymmetry that the baby experiences as an excess of meaning, beyond what she can comprehend, and this experience of excess has been seen as the birthplace of sexuality. In Laplanche’s model, the baby’s developing sexuality is patterned around the particularities of the parent’s (sexual) unconscious. And, in the experience of excess, the symmetrical mode is strongly felt as well, as a feeling of excitement and overwhelm that are larger than the particular situation. There is always a tension here, at the way symmetry and asymmetry can be so close together, so interdependent and co-arising, that they can be very mixed up together. In fact, one reason for sexuality's poignant power (Stein, 1998) is its full admixture of the strongly asymmetrical dimensions of difference and otherness right along with strong symmetrical undertows toward merger.

So what are the implications here? Important aspects of sexuality are constellated around a primary experience of asymmetry, the largeness of the mother’s sexual unconscious. The nature of this developing sexuality will be patterned in a particular, individual way, depending on the qualities of the mother’s unconscious, and will be shaped over time by other encounters in the world. At the same time, sexuality also partakes strongly of more symmetrical dimensions of the system unconscious. This moving energy of sexuality is an admixture of two trends: the symmetrizing and asymmetrizing.

Symmetry and Asymmetry in Sexuality
Asymmetrizing tendencies are very noticeable in the manifestations of adult sexuality. These are the erotizations of difference: big/small, master/slave, woman/man, soft/hard. This is the dimension of sexuality that has been understood as the experience of otherness, of excess, of excitement and tension. Many writers (Lacan, Stein, Laplanche, Mitchell) have theorized the primacy of alterity in sexuality. According to Laplanche (1997), sexuality is born with the experience of the mother as other, and as unknown. Thus he puts heavy value on the structurizing experience of otherness in forming the sexual unconscious.

The symmetrizing energy of sexuality is that which moves us toward the bliss of union, experiences and phantasies of merger, loss of boundaries between self and other. This may be felt as a mix-up between subject and object, dissolving, melting, or fusing. Analysts starting with Freud have approached the role of symmetry in sexuality, but the idea has not been systematically developed. Freud (1920, 1924) described the Nirvana Principle as the aspect of drive “whose aim is to conduct the restlessness of life into the stability of the inorganic state.” Using the language of his hydraulic model of the mind, Freud conceived of the drive to reduce stimulation and tension as fundamental, and he linked it to a movement back toward simpler, inorganic forms of existence. However, Freud theorized the Nirvana Principle as part of the death drive, and saw it as of a piece with the destructive, aggressive, and entrenched repetitions we think of as constituting the death drive, especially as elaborated by Melanie Klein.

Matte Blanco has another take on the Nirvana Principle, and sees it as “the mode of being where symmetry rules and there is no space-time, no movement, no
happening” (Matte Blanco, 1988, p. 218). He says, “it is not the death instinct which we come across, but a desire for the indivisible mode.” And yet how does libido enter into the picture? Freud grappled with this question when he introduced the idea of primary narcissism (1920), building on earlier work by Ferenczi (1913), on the importance of the earliest stage of development, that of merger with the mother, when omnipotence reigns supreme. Freud theorized that there is libido present in this early stage, but it is not attached to either objects or to the ego, but rather to the omnipotent version of the self. This formulation got him into some well-documented theoretical tangles. And yet we can see that Freud was grappling with how to explain his intuition that the earliest stages of merger also partake of libido, yet not the libido we can understand in terms of object-related sexual drives.

As development proceeds toward an increasing preponderance of asymmetrical functioning, which also gives rise to a differentiated ego function, the movement of sexuality becomes dualistic, and we experience ourselves as subjects eroticly seeking objects. Indeed, to the degree that the ego retains an unconscious memory of what Freud calls primary narcissism, what Matte Blanco calls a state of symmetry, and seeks a regression or return to this state, the very existence of the ego is threatened. And so we might say, with Matte Blanco, that the great error of “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” is the substitution of the lifeless inorganic for primary narcissism, the state of symmetry.

Desire is always predicated on difference, otherness, asymmetry (Stein, 1998). And yet I suggest that desire seeks an experience of symmetry, the eradication of difference, which is experienced in the culmination of the sexual act,
in orgasm. So there is a real paradox here: desire leads us to its annihilation and 
satiation, in orgasm. And, desire is never fully satisfied, it always returns. In this way 
sexuality is about the mixture of play with difference at the same time that we seek 
its dissolution.

**Patterns of Consciousness**

According to much of psychoanalytic theory, we develop through linear and 
universal stages, in a way that links us to our instinctual selves. In this model, the 
developing erotic being is also subject to fixation, or stalling out along the way. And 
in the work of psychoanalysis we inevitably regress back to the place and time of 
that weak spot, to restart a stalled developmental process (Winnicott, 1954; ,Balint, 
1979). There are common sites of developmental arrest; in addition to Freud’s 
Oedipal, anal, and oral fixations, modern analysts often note places of relational 
failure, narcissistic withdrawal, and emotional constriction.

So, what happens if we revisit this 19th century model of development in light 
of “the great cataclysm of postmodern theoretical revision?” (Gonzalez, 2009). What 
if we follow Matte Blanco’s lead and take our theory into the zones of the 
unconscious, where binaries like time, space, gender, and self/other boundaries, 
may be called into question? We might start by noticing that if we loosen 
development from the bind of linear time, it slides around. We can feel like a two 
year old at the same moment we feel like a newborn infant and like a 45-year-old 
woman. We are always sliding between many moments in developmental time, 
which don’t necessarily go in order. And we are also always in contact with the 
timelessness of the unconscious, with a state in which there is no time. In this spirit,
we can say that what we are used to calling “regression” is not primarily a moving back in time (though it may be that in part), but rather a refinding of a mode of being, perceiving, and relating that was always there, or always in the process of becoming (Deleuze, 1990).

Matte Blanco’s model of the unconscious helps us here. In his model, the unconscious is not only a stratified archaeological site entombing conflicts at various psychosexual stages. In Matte Blanco’s vision it is a flowing, pulsating pattern of different saturations and mixtures of symmetry and asymmetry. At the levels of the deepest unconscious, which are always present, symmetry prevails. And at the level of everyday conscious thought, asymmetrical modes of thinking and perceiving dominate. Matte Blanco’s model relates differently to time, space, and being, compared with developmental models. And so instead of progressing or regressing through developmental time, we can say we gain access to an ever-increasing spectrum of modes of perception, including but not limited to those that we associate with our particular experiences in our human (psycho-sexual) development.

**Bi-Logic and Sexuality**

If we overlay Freud’s theory of libidinal development with Matte Blanco’s bi-logical structure of the unconscious, we might get what I playfully term bi-sexuality. It’s a shimmering, multidimensional model of sexuality that includes not only the ever insistent reminders of the ways libidinal development is inscribed on our bodies, but also the ways we are not limited by it. At this moment, at any moment, we have the potential to experience any state of sexual development, fantasy, or
identification. We shimmy and slither through these, often in multiple layers, as we live our experience. Adult sexuality offers us a spectacularly condensed view into the erotic forms of symmetry and asymmetry. We tend to experience our erotic lives in patterned ways, and much of psychoanalytic theory is of richly detailed descriptions of these patterns. And yet, sexuality also takes us to symmetrical modes of experience, where patterns start to fade, and experiences of at-one-ment, peace, and the dropping away of the structures of the self, are close to our awareness. We may see this as a regression. At the same time, it is a way of cultivating a level of experience that is not in the foreground in our day-to-day conscious minds. Notably, predominantly symmetrized structures are not very object related states. They may be narcissistic, when symmetry runs amok, or mystical, when symmetry is perceived in non-persecutory experiences of space, unity, and peace.

Matte Blanco developed a schema of the mind from a bi-logical point of view, made up of stratified levels of experience from the most asymmetrical layers of the conscious mind to the primarily symmetrical structures of the deepest unconscious. In the spirit of a dance, which is both playful and erotic, I’d like to bring Matte Blanco’s bi-logical model of the mind together with psychosexual models. Because this material is a bit abstract, I’ll use some case material to illustrate each stratum of the mind.

And so, I introduce you to Gabriel, an attorney in his 50’s who came to see me because of a lifelong pattern with women of feeling desperately needy, alternating with disgust and rejection once he became involved with someone. Growing up, Gabriel had suffered repeated humiliating tirades from his father, and emotional
neglect from his mother. Over time he slowly told me about his sexual phantasy life. He often masturbates to a video loop of a woman shaking her rear end. Because of the loop, the video plays endlessly the same, always shaking exactly the same way. Then when he reaches a level of excitement, he enters her forcefully. He has the emotional phantasy that she is being humiliated in this act, but that she has to do it to keep up her social standing. He orgasms to a phantasy of penetrating all the way into her, through her anus. Gabriel also described a phantasy he’d often had since he was a child, of a giant cartoon panda sitting on his face and pooping in his mouth, feeding him with the poop. He found this image very soothing, and sometimes it helped him get to sleep. I want to make clear that although Gabriel has a clear preference for phantasies based on anality, it is not my intention to pathologize anality per se, but rather to explore with curiosity the meanings of this particular set of phantasies. So, let’s see how we can come to understand Matte Blanco’s bi-logical structures of the mind, using Gabriel and our work together as an illustration.

*The First Stratum: Conscious Mind*

(Introduce a Fig. 3 here, which gets added to each time I talk about a new stratum, and include a second column with clinical illustration of Gabriel). Matte Blanco’s first stratum of mind is the most asymmetrical; it is our most conscious mind, and it is characterized by well-delineated objects and thoughts. It is also the level of rational, scientific thinking (Matte Blanco, 1988). In psychosexual terms, we might say this corresponds to the successful resolution of the Oedipal stage. (add a column to the Figure, with psychosexual stages). Separation and differentiation are achieved, and things can be perceived more objectively. This is the aspect of Oedipal
structures emphasized strongly by Klein and Bion, it’s relationship to thirdness and the space of the triangular structure.Erotically speaking, here we find the appreciation of difference, separateness, and hence relatedness. At this first, most conscious stratum, Gabriel and I actually spent quite a bit of time working through the dilemmas of life, such as decisions regarding situations at work and in relationships, in a generally productive way. Also mostly in this mode we handled logistical aspects of the frame, including their frequent disruptions. We brought emotional and relational patterns around deception, shame, and ambivalence into the conscious realm in order to think about them together.

*The Second Stratum: Emotions*

The next stratum down is that of more-or-less conscious emotions (Matte Blanco, 1988), and here there is more symmetry happening. This is the realm of strong feelings and the patterns they form: for example. I fear him, I hate him, which becomes, all men are out to get you. Perhaps this corresponds to the genital and early oedipal stage, where dramas of love and hate predominate. These characterize the emotional and relational day-to-day lives we lead. It is the layer of attachments and their vicissitudes, erotic entanglements of all sorts. Here we find epic stories of love and hate, desire and betrayal, and fame and humiliation. At this second stratum, Gabriel and I worked through strong currents of desperate longing and confusion that opened out into tremendous anger at his parents. Further along there were humiliating realms of endless shame, rejection, and retribution.
The Third Stratum: The Personal Unconscious

The third stratum, according to bi-logic, is the layer of symmetrization of class, which roughly equates to the personal unconscious. At this level, things relate to each other in broad attributes: all men are the same. Any individual becomes its class. There are strong, primitive affects of love and hate. Essential features of this stratum are captured by descriptions of the oral-incorporative and anal-expulsive layers of the psychosexual unconscious. Objects are literally taken into the self, and so become identical with it, or are expelled from the self. Matte Blanco says Melanie Klein did a good job describing this level of the mind, in her descriptions of the furies of unconscious phantasy. Movement is in broad swaths. Erotic life at this level may be taken up with issues of incorporating the other into the self, and expelling or being expelled from or by the other.

In the layer of the personal unconscious, Matte Blanco’s third stratum, shapes emerge more slowly, often through dream images, or perhaps erotic phantasies (see Stoller, 1992). At this level, Gabriel and I were able to articulate the erotization of the humiliation suffered with his parents, through the lens of his anal phantasies. We talked about how his erotically charged phantasies made the “dirty” anus reverse into being the site of great desire and pleasure. This goes along with his own phantasied reversal into triumph in sex, in which he is the humiliator. Over the course of time we could explore both the memories of emotional trauma expressed in these phantasies, and also the deep bodily-based feelings associated with incorporation and need, and expulsion and disgust. In Meltzer’s (2008) terms, we
toured the anal claustrum. Themes of an oscillation between oral-incorporative and anal-expulsive modes were illustrated in the phantasy of the poop-panda.

*The Fourth Stratum: Trans-Consciousness*

Actually here we are moving into the fourth stratum, that of more symmetrical patterns and structures that transcend the individual. These may be structures that are transgenerational, transcultural, perhaps even transpersonal. The fourth stratum is one we might think of as the level of the collective unconscious, or what Bion (1962) called preconception. This is the realm of myth, art, and spirituality. There is even more symmetry, and things are experienced as united in a very broad community, and even as all being one.

It is from this stratum of trans-consciousness that we experience feelings such as erotic or mystical union, the laying down of boundaries between self and other. This layer of deep symmetry can produce psychotic symptoms, or great peace and serenity (Rayner, 1995). When the level of trans-consciousness is not strongly contained by a capacity for alpha-function, and when it is thus experienced in a persecutory way, psychotic or traumatic symptoms may emerge that threaten to overwhelm the personality (Bion, 1962). And when strong symmetry is held firmly by an aesthetic structure, a spiritual form, or a boundaried relationship, it is no longer felt to be so dangerous, and can be experienced as a joyous expansion of consciousness beyond the individual self.

Psychosexually, this is the territory of the prenatal, the primal experience of oneness in the womb. In his description of the monad, the psychic experience of unity with mother, Grunberger (1990) sees this level of consciousness as giving rise
to experiences of serenity, sovereignty, completeness, freedom, and mystical feeling.

In adult erotic experience, at this level we experience the falling away of boundaries between self and other, merger, bliss, and even transcendence. Both Hindu and Buddhist Tantric lineages have explored this level of sacred sexuality in advanced spiritual practice, and explicate how practitioners can use the energy of sexual excitement to fuel profound awakening into realms of the vastness. On the other hand, either personal disruptions at the level of the monad, or transgenerationally transmitted trauma that manifests in this realm, can lead to a fusional cul-de-sac. Here we may see psychotic problems with thinking, pathological narcissism, and perversions. We may also see tendencies to dissociation and splitting.

Gabriel and I linked the deep shame that was being passed down through generations of his family to the experience of his great grandparents of political terror and forced immigration. Working with this layer actually allowed him to have a serious relationship with the products of his mind for the first time. In his phantasy, this was linked to the wish to get all the way inside a woman, even if violently. Here we see a fusion of sexuality and aggression at the prenatal level. Gabriel was driven toward the gratification of oneness, of the return to the womb, the primordial symbiosis, but his feeling of being expelled was so great that he had to force his way back inside. This also linked to the experience of his grandparents, of being forced out of their home by a genocidal political regime, and then never speaking of those experiences.

*The Fifth Stratum: Absolute Reality*
Matte Blanco’s deepest stratum is toward the mathematical limit of symmetry; this is the realm of the indivisible. This layer is so symmetrical that we can’t know it through our thinking minds, which rely on some degree of asymmetry (Rayner, 1995). Bion talked about this as O, ultimate truth, absolute reality (Bion, 1965). This ultimate reality is also associated with Kant’s "things-in-themselves" (Kant, 1791), Lacan’s "Register of the Real" (Lacan, 1997), the Godhead, Buddhist emptiness. Here is an experience of primal harmony and serenity, if we have enough of a container for it, a capacity to be "at-one" with it. Here we tip completely off the developmental map, back into what we might conceptualize as our state before conception. The famous Zen koan asks you about your original face, before your parents were born, inviting us into the inconceivable.

But can we rightly call a state that is completely symmetrical and still, erotic? Yes, in the most extensive way possible. Matte Blanco points out that this state is not object-related, so there is no duality, no erotic subject as separate from an object. Yet accounts of contact with this state by spiritual adepts from many traditions describe awakening experiences in sexually rapturous language. Access to these states through the gate of eros is a goal of advanced Tantric practices, and indeed they may be experienced by many of us at a few peak erotic, aesthetic, or spiritual moments. And these moments, intimations of the great erotic beauty of infinity, become propellers of development. Many people retain a deep feeling of, or yearning for, this state. This yearning can lead us to pursue creative, aesthetic, spiritual, and sexual experiences that may offer us glimpses of the infinite. On the other hand, some people equate the infinite with death or infinite object loss, and so
become terrified of it. Infinity is felt as a terrible persecutor, instead of a realm of great possibility and fecundity.

What can we say about Gabriel’s relationship to the strata of infinity, of O? He had a wish for it, as manifest in the image of the endlessly jiggling ass. But he has been stuck at the cul-de-sac of what Matte Blanco called “symmetrical frenzy,” the state of erasing differences, meanings, and aspects of truth. We linked these frenzies to experiences of shameful annihilation. At the same time, he was terrified of decline and death. In other words, perhaps Gabriel’s relationship with infinity is based on an experience of endless annihilation and humiliation, reversed into its triumphant opposite when he sees the forever jiggling ass. He actually forecloses direct experiences of infinity through surrender, which are too terrifying, and substitutes its perversion into submission (Ghent, 1990)

Let’s move, at this point, to another patient’s different relationship to her phantasy life, and to the layers of psychosexuality, with a special focus on the fifth stratum, that of the infinite. Noelle is an anxious, expressive young academic who identifies as queer. We have come to explore many of her erotic phantasies in a way similar to how we work with dreams. The phantasies change over time, though themes of emotional and physical attunement leading to blissful merger experiences are often present. In one phantasy she imagines listening to music with a colleague. They are so moved by the aesthetic experience that they become sexually involved. She describes a feeling of erotic mix-up: she can’t tell who is doing what to whom. Body parts and sensations are felt as both subject and object. As she moves toward orgasm she phantasizes being vaginally tethered to her lover, and the tether pulls
both of them crashing into and through each other at the moment of orgasm. She describes it as a feeling of being jerked through a tight hole back into something vast. Noelle phantasizes orgasm as blissful contact with O, the infinite. Here we find strong currents toward symmetry and idealization, a very different erotic relationship with O than Gabriel’s.

**The Eros of Infinity**

We all have an erotic relationship to infinity, to O, to oneness, to Matte Blanco’s fifth stratum of complete symmetry. In adult sexuality we may feel this most strongly in orgasm. Orgasm is often compared to death, as in the French “petit mort,” little death. Bataille linked sexuality and particularly orgasm, to both death and transcendence (Bataille, 1957). The experience of orgasm is often described as a falling away of barriers and separations. Jorge Luis Borges wrote, “All men, in the vertiginous moment of coitus, are the same man.” (Borges, 1994, p. 28). And so, orgasm offers us a peek right at O, at the vastness. It offers us a portal into transcendence—of the self, and of ordinary limitations in time and space. In this momentary, blissful experience we taste the concentration on the physical experience of shattering, releasing, dissolving, exploding, merging. Orgasm is an intensely physical experience, and so the phantasy representations we have for it are about changing states of matter. Sexuality becomes psychological when it is represented in terms of phantasy, both conscious and unconscious. How we portray our experience at orgasm in terms of phantasy depends in part on our relationship to O. Gabriel, who has a primarily persecutory relationship to O, phantasizes orgasm as a conquering, a triumph over the other. Here sexuality is fundamentally oriented
toward a phantasy of aggression, and O is experienced as triumphant reversal at the moment of his orgasm. Yet it is also experienced as a deep penetration of the other, getting all the way inside her. This aspect of his erotic relationship to O was phantasied as getting into the other, a kind of incorporation and merger, which feels very different from the more expulsive phantasy of his aggressive strand. Noelle explicitly sought experiences of O in her sexual phantasy life and eroticized experiences of merger. Her sexual phantasy of orgasm is one of physical union with her lover, and then one of a spiritual merger with the vastness. Because we are fundamentally sexual creatures, we create sexual phantasies that represent and illustrate our erotic relationship to infinity, to the absolute. These phantasies often include an omnipotent sense of the self, a banishment of all obstacles and barriers, a merger with or triumph over the other, and sensations of falling apart, or dissolving. I even wonder if a person’s preferred phantasy at the moment of orgasm might be an erotic representation of their relationship to O.

The movement toward dedifferentiation in sexuality is not only a movement toward a regression to an earlier part of the personality. It is also a way of contacting a mode of experiencing with tremendous power in the present tense. It is a feeling of a falling away of boundaries, of limits, of separation, and into an experience of union and largeness that contains tremendous energy, tremendous light. Our human erotic experience is a kind of distillation and condensation of this energy, as shaped by bodily experience and by development. And so sexuality always bears the stamp of infinity, and it partakes deeply of the relationship we have developed with infinity. This helps account for the central importance of
sexuality in the psyche, and also for the ways it tends to manifest in extremes, in states of desire and ecstasy and obsession, that pull us toward our outer limits. One of the key reasons for the unique and mysterious power of sexuality in our lives is because of its function as a point of access to strata of consciousness that don’t always seem available to us, and in particular as a link to O, to absolute symmetry.

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