

**Lana Lin, *Freud's Jaw and Other Lost Objects: Fractured Subjectivity in the Face of Cancer*, Fordham UP, 2017
(Ashley A. Byczkowski)**

In Lana Lin's first book, readers are invited to interact with the theoretical innerworkings of the prolific multidisciplinary artist, filmmaker, and writer behind projects such as "Dream of a Keen" (2017) and *The Cancer Journals Revisited* (2018). *Freud's Jaw and Other Lost Objects: Fractured Subjectivity in the Face of Cancer* (2017) carries readers through an expertly crafted collage of experiences ranging from Sigmund Freud's story about his favorite dog¹ to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's uncanny inner dialogue that responds to the question of how many breasts she should put on with a whisper of "three."² While diving deeply into the lives and writings of her three subjects of inquiry: Sigmund Freud, Audre Lorde, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick; Lana Lin frames her study around a significant gap in psychoanalysis: that of the effects of cancer on the psyche.

This pioneering work asks how a discipline whose creator and father suffered from this very disease could relegate cancer to such a peripheral and metaphorical function. As if to right this wrong from the onset, Lin's first chapter is dedicated to recounting the details of Freud's own 15-year long relationship to oral and jaw cancer. Lin explains that cancer comes to symbolize a complex connection to one's body, exposing the subject "to the vulnerability of her perceived bodily integrity and agency, rupturing her sense of wholeness as a human being [...]. In short, cancer shows the *hole in the whole*."³ While Lin does not take the enticing Lacanian approach to this apparent lack exposed by cancer, her recurrent interaction throughout the book's chapters with psychoanalytic theory (namely the death drive and object relations), as well as the discipline's history, exposes the substantial lack in psychoanalysis around the unconscious effects of terminal illness. Lin argues in her introduction that this lack is striking, especially since "[c]ancer can be seen as doing the work of psychoanalysis in making conscious what

¹ Lana Lin, *Freud's Jaw and Other Lost Objects: Fractured Subjectivity in the Face of Cancer*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 53

² Ibid, 99

³ Ibid, 2 (my emphasis)

was once unconscious”⁴ namely, “death’s immanence in life.”⁵

After spending three years training to be a psychoanalyst, Lana Lin decided to go back to school and was diagnosed with cancer while in her doctoral program at New York University in Media Studies. At the point of her own confrontation with this “hole in the whole,” Lin found herself surrounded by cancer research and medical literature that entirely failed to “attend to the unconscious psychic dimension” of being diagnosed with cancer. In an interview with *Public Seminar*, she explains: “I wanted to write an account of the psychically destabilizing effect of life-threatening illness,” and *Freud’s Jaw* attends to this need, both on the personal and collective level.⁶

Lana Lin’s contribution to the cancerous gap in psychoanalysis promotes an approach based primarily in object relations theory as she describes each authors’ relationship to cancer in terms of objects. Chapter 1 examines Freud’s ambivalent attachment to his prosthetic mouth piece, chapter 2 falls under the title of “Keen for the First Object: A Kleinian Reading of Audre Lorde’s Life Writing,” chapter 3 reads Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s writings as love-objects, and chapter 4 looks at the physical and lost objects collected in the Freudian archives. Lin’s work highlights the dissociative, traumatic, and primal effects cancer has on the subject, supporting object relations theorist Melanie Klein’s argument that “trauma later in life can revive the infantile destruction and reparation of part-objects.”⁷ Following this, Lin reads how the trauma of cancer compartmentalizes the body into cancerous and non-cancerous parts, or what Melanie Klein would call good and bad objects. This return to an infantile relationship to one’s own body is a compelling reason for Lin to weave such a strong thread of object relations theory into her manuscript.

Not so surprisingly, Lin’s main argument has to do with reparation. The innovative concept put forth by Melanie Klein in her 1937 essay “Love, Guilt and Reparation,” focuses on “the creative and constructive forces that one harnesses to repair damage to one’s internal psychic objects.”⁸ Lin

⁴ Ibid, 5

⁵ Ibid, 2

⁶ Lana Lin, “Freud’s Jaw and Other Lost Objects.” *Public Seminar*, The New School, May 21, 2018: www.publicseminar.org/2018/05/freuds-jaw-and-other-lost-objects/

⁷ Ibid, 11

⁸ Ibid, 3.

argues that Freud, Lorde, and Sedgwick are “in the process of devolving into fragmented partial objects and must devise means to reinstate, at least temporarily, their physical and psychic unity.”⁹ This process of reinstatement, Lin continues, “is accomplished through creative reparative projects such as love or writing.”¹⁰ Lin carefully emphasizes that reparation “does not equate to a reintegration or a making whole,”¹¹ which echoes Freud’s description of psychoanalysis as a construction (rather than a reconstruction), meaning that reparation here functions in a creative way that makes space for the new, rather than a patched up version of something old. *Freud’s Jaw* begins with an epigraph that immediately sets forth the thesis of Lin’s work: “Every text poses itself as a demand for survival...”. In the face of terminal illness, or as Lin puts it, in the face of absolute “destruction,” there is space for reparation and ultimately creativity overcomes mortality.

Lin’s first chapter on Freud’s oral cancer also incorporates a reading of the Freudian death drive as she searches for how Freud dealt with “death’s immanence in life.”¹² What Lin terms the “cancerous object”¹³ in psychoanalysis, which is to say cancer-as-metaphor, first appears in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* when he proposes his theory of the death drive and writes that “the cell of the malignant neoplasms which destroy the organism should also perhaps be described as narcissistic.”¹⁴ Lin takes Freud’s usage of ‘malignant’ here to turn his theory of narcissistic cellular behavior into her own interpretation of the death drive, now by way of cancer, into what she terms “not-death.”¹⁵ She writes:

Cancer epitomizes the workings of the death drive in its aim of returning the organism to a state of inertia, while also demonstrating the strivings of the life drives toward immortality. [...] The death drive, with cancer as its avatar, is more about “not-death,” that is, the process of entanglement of the life and death drives, than it is

⁹ Ibid, 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 3.

¹² Ibid, 2.

¹³ Ibid, 4.

¹⁴ Ibid, 8.

¹⁵ Ibid.

about death itself.¹⁶

Lin argues that Freud's death drive is rather a "not-death drive" and contends "that cancer has a psychoanalytic meaning."¹⁷ While bringing about the death of the subject's body, cancer cells also "proliferate profusely, and can therefore be seen as carriers of the life instincts."¹⁸ By using cancer to interpret the death drive, Lin turns this interweaving of life and death into the not-death drive and then on to Freud's addiction to smoking which "invites both death and immortality, through the creation of immortal works." (51) It is through the "not-death" concept that Lin advances her argument that Freud's response to cancer was in fact reparative, in the Kleinian sense of the word. In the face of death, Freud participates in the "reparative work of mourning"¹⁹ as he leans on his "love-objects," (his prostheses, cigars, dogs, and daughter) "to sustain his creativity," ultimately producing the body of psychoanalysis that shapes the foundations of this book.

Lin's second chapter looks at the life and literary work of "black, feminist, lesbian, poet, mother, warrior," Audre Lorde.²⁰ Lin's approach to Lorde's work in this chapter works between the disciplines of psychoanalytic object relations theory and black feminism as she questions the sexist and racist implications in the western societal treatment of breast cancer. Lin, while applying Klein's object relations theory to Lorde, is quick to admit that Klein's work fails to "fully take into account the socioeconomic and cultural environment,"²¹ and yet reveals how object relations theory elucidates the "catastrophic consequences"²² of a society incapable of accepting difference. Lin asserts:

The "no-breasted" postmastectomy woman, the person of color, the gender nonconforming, the disabled, the poor, and the old, each of these subjects are ejected as foreign objects from a society that can

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 49.

¹⁸ Ibid, 46.

¹⁹ Ibid, 23.

²⁰ Ibid, 69.

²¹ Ibid, 62.

²² Ibid, 59.

only perceive of difference as endangering.²³

Lin employs an approach closer to literary criticism while reading Lorde's poetry, essays, letters and 1980 autoethnographic work *The Cancer Journals*. Lin's reading of Lorde's life writing highlights Lorde's particularly creative and reparative response to her breast cancer diagnosis as an altruistic sacrifice for the betterment of others. Lin shows how Lorde offered herself up "as an object that can facilitate [...] repair, 'like a drug or a chisel,' as [Lorde] says. She fashions herself as an instrument for her community's use,"²⁴ by way of her mourning of the lost breast. Lin's second chapter distinguishes itself from the first by shifting from the experience of a white male intellectual suffering from an addiction-induced cancer, to a black feminist lesbian poet rebelling against the terms with which her anatomy-based cancer is even addressed by society. Lorde "lambasted the recommendation that prostheses could solve employment discrimination, comparing this to fighting racial prejudice by asking black people to pretend to be white."²⁵ As such, this second chapter extends through Lorde's writing to consider breasts, breast cancer, and breast reconstruction in their cultural and social contexts. In keeping with her theoretical undertaking, Lin also reads the psychoanalytic implications of breast cancer by focusing on the unconscious relations humans have to the breast as "the psychic home of good and bad objects and the origins of subject formation."²⁶ She continues: "Breast reconstruction mirrors a retreat to the infantile relationship of 'being' one with one's objects, and the woman comes to view herself as complete only after completely identifying herself with her breast."²⁷ As Lin recounts Lorde's rejection of the societal breast, she delineates Lorde's reparative response to her cancer, one that was fashioned from writing and community. Lin concludes: "Phantasy does the kind of work for Klein that poetry does for Lorde, which is to make thought, hence life, possible."²⁸

In chapter 3 "Object Love in the Later Writings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick," Lin continues her critical work on breast reconstruction by here

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 24.

²⁵ Ibid, 59.

²⁶ Ibid, 63.

²⁷ Ibid, 72.

²⁸ Ibid, 61.

focusing in on the “comfort culture”²⁹ around breast cancer as a whole. Locating it “at the intersection of trauma and consumerism,” Lin highlights the ways in which breast cancer diagnosis encourages a this-too-shall-pass mentality towards hardship “rather than actively interrogat[ing it] as an impetus for change.”³⁰ Lin procures this conclusion by consulting two of Sedgwick’s least studied works: her contributions to *MAMM*, the magazine for “women, cancer, and community,” and *A Dialogue on Love*, Sedgwick’s memoir on her therapy. In a similar way to Lorde, Lin demonstrates the extent to which Sedgwick’s response to her own mortality serves the collective: “I argue that Sedgwick’s journalistic and experimental writing circulates a public discourse of love that mediates her relationship to her own mortality.”³¹ Lin read’s Sedgwick’s later works as indicative of her becoming a love-object “by disseminating pieces of herself in her published works” wherein she “strives to serve as an instrument for good pedagogy.”³² Throughout this chapter, Lin’s narrative weaves between Sedgwick’s “gallows humor”³³ and Buddhist philosophy³⁴ while simultaneously considering the psychoanalytic implications of a culture that is extensively prepared to make breast cancer approachable. In her subsection titled “Object-use, object-love” Lin highlights the ways in which Sedgwick, like Lorde, turned herself into an object to be at once used and loved by others suffering from similar terminal illnesses.³⁵ As stated above, Lana Lin was also diagnosed with cancer and learned, through discussions with Sedgwick’s husband Hal, that the two women shared the same oncologist. In the face of this discovery, Lin lets herself be swept up in what she terms “Sedgwick’s public discourse of love,” and similarly to Sedgwick, Lin deploys this discourse “to mediate her relationship to illness and mortality.”³⁶ She concludes the chapter sharing the lessons Sedgwick passed on to her: “She teaches me that publications are vital, animate, collaborative objects

²⁹ Ibid, 85.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 24.

³² Ibid, 83.

³³ Ibid, 82.

³⁴ Ibid, 113.

³⁵ Ibid, 98.

³⁶ Ibid, 97.

that perform the work of mourning and love."³⁷ Lin's personal touches throughout her book, but especially in this third chapter, unveil the extent to which *Freud's Jaw* reaches beyond the normal confines of academic publishing and is capable of speaking to a much larger audience.

The fourth chapter, in a slightly destabilizing way, returns to Freud, this time to consider "Freud's dying amid his profuse collection of antiquities."³⁸ Under the title "Reparative Object in the Freudian Archives," Lin examines the role Freud's collected objects played both in his own confrontation with his mortality, and how they continue to produce effects around Freud's death in both the London and Vienna Freud Museums. Thus, this chapter is guided by a question surrounding the role material forms can play in psychic reparation. Lin asks: "How can the forms that we creatively construct—through writing, collecting, photography, or museum exhibition—repair traumatic fissures?"³⁹ As such, Lin performs close readings of the composition and structure of the two museums, further emphasizing the multidisciplinary nature of *Freud's Jaw*. Considering the circumstances of Freud's last year as being one full of exile and fear, Lin views "'Freud's toys' as reparative objects in the sense that they appeased his anxieties about the process of dying, mitigating his fears of mortality" (126). However, once Freud dies and these now "death objects"⁴⁰ fall into the hands of his daughter Anna, Lin contends that they become objects of melancholia and fetish. The London Museum, which boastfully presents the entirety of Freud's collection of antiquities, Lin argues, "is guilty [like Freud] of uncritically romanticizing an exotic past and laying claim to it for its own purposes."⁴¹ On the other end, the Vienna Museum, Lin argues, is faced with a much more complex situation of "desire to authenticate itself as the original site of psychoanalysis" and "historical accountability," which insists on maintaining a certain level of absence.⁴² Since none of Freud's objects were returned to his Berggasse 19 apartment (save a single hat that was at one point stolen), the Vienna Museum was forced to reconstruct his living space with photographs taken just before his

³⁷ Ibid, 114.

³⁸ Ibid, 115.

³⁹ Ibid, 116.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 128.

⁴² Ibid, 133.

departure to London. Lin proposes "that the movement away from the actual space at Berggasse 19 to the photographic reproduction is one of fetishism."⁴³ She continues: "The photographic framing of the Museum's lost objects reveals how substitute objects are enlisted in an effort to mitigate loss. Yet despite fetishistic desires to disavow it, absence forms the core of the Vienna Museum experience."⁴⁴ Ultimately, this last chapter reads the two Museums' attempts at the integration of their lost object (Freud) as similar to the "subjectivities-in-dissolution" that Lin examines in her previous chapters, which Lin continues, is an integration "tethered to persistent discontinuities"⁴⁵

Arriving at the conclusion of Lana Lin's *Freud's Jaw and Other Lost Objects* leaves one with the sense of revelation; that in reading Lin's study, one is immersed in a new theoretical inquiry, that of the unconscious effects of cancer on the human psyche. Additionally, this effect is unimpeded because Lin's style is not ensnared in academic jargon. Her congenial and touching writing lends an approachability to the often-ponderous nature of psychoanalytic studies. The structure of *Freud's Jaw*, while coherent and cathartic, does present a stark contrast between the two chapters dedicated to Freud and the two chapters that address broader, more contemporary and socially relevant discussions of two queer women; one of color avidly working to promote unity through difference, the other deeply invested in a pedagogy of love that advances a philosophy of "life as an ongoing collaborative project."⁴⁶ While all three subjects of inquiry have what Lin argues as a reparative response to cancer, it is undeniable that following cancer diagnosis, Audre Lorde and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick made deliberate changes in their lives and work to make contributions that represented revelations discovered post-diagnosis to their political and cultural communities. Freud on the other hand, was already a prolific, cigar-smoking pioneer in his study of the unconscious, and Lin's book does not make clear whether or not his cancer diagnosis changed his approach to his theoretical contributions. However, Lin's overall argument, that "cancer or the threat of death impels people to take account of their lives, and awakens a desire

⁴³ Ibid, 139.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 130.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 145.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 24.

to make reparation,⁴⁷ is not disproven by this contrast, rather, by including two chapters that address Freud and his archive, Lin manages to create a work that undertakes both a need to read cancer into psychoanalysis, and to read psychoanalysis into cancer.

Overall, *Freud's Jaw* speaks to a larger conversation about facing our shortcomings, about locating the 'hole in the whole', and about having a positive and reparative response to the only reality we all share, our own mortality. Sprinkled throughout this magnificent contribution to the field of psychoanalysis are phrases that make you take pause and consider the effects such a discipline could have if more works were written in such an enticing and engaging fashion. Here's just one example:

Only by attending to, rather than disavowing, perennial loss can we as a culture and as a collection of lost objects ourselves, re-find ourselves, love one another, and labor toward physical, emotional, and political reparations.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid, 151.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 13.