

### 3 TOMKINS IN TENSION

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In the Netflix dramedy *The Chair* (about an English department in an elite US university) Professor Ji-Yoon Kim (played by Sandra Oh) finds herself having to explain to David Duchovny (played by David Duchovny) why his dissertation on Beckett, written over thirty years ago, is out of date. A lot has happened in the field in the last thirty years, she explains. In response to Duchovny's request for an example of these scholarly advances, Kim provides a list: "affect theory, eco-criticism, digital humanities, new materialism, book history, developments in gender studies and critical race theory." In comparison, Kim notes, Duchovny's dissertation "reads like it's out of the mid-80s. . . . The discipline has moved forward, and you are still stuck back in a different era" ("The Last Bus in Town"). Missing from Professor Kim's list are a number of scholarly fields that, according to the generational logic of the show, we can presume to be old and due for retirement. Queer theory is not mentioned and neither is psychoanalytic theory, the latter presumably eons past its use-by date. We can infer that literary criticism, and the university as a whole, has moved on; for now, at least, we have affect theory, placed at the very top of Kim's list, as it promises to lead us into a new era of scholarly excellence and political relevance.

Although this sequential linear logic of scholarly progress is completely unsurprising in a television show like *The Chair*, we have also encountered this logic (first psychoanalysis, then affect theory) in the academic institutions that we inhabit: we read it in journals and university presses; we see it at conferences; and we hear it from students who learn, perhaps overzealously, the polemical gestures necessary to make space for new research. At the same time and often for similar professionalizing reasons, affect theories are pit against one another to highlight irresolvable disjunctions between them: affect *or* emotion *or* cognition; signification *or* impersonal perception *or* embodiment; empirical *or* theoretical; subjectivity *or* the social world. But we may have noticed by now that in the theoretical humanities, one theory of affect does not either update or replace another. And attempts to create affect lineages or genealogies that are distinct from one another under-read the ways in which different affect theories are entangled in, and indebted to, each other (Frank and Wilson 2012, 2020; Wilson 2020).

Unpersuaded by these generational logics of substitution as well as the tendency to accentuate disjunctive conflict, we turn instead to *tension* as our guiding heuristic. Tension (from the Latin *tendere*, to stretch) holds a particularly close relationship to psychological states: a straining of feelings or nerves. We would like to follow more closely the idea that theories in tension stretch each other, that they pull each other in new and surprising directions, and that they remain connected rather than fall away from each other into empty antagonisms. Specifically, in this chapter we stage a series of encounters between the affect theory of Silvan Tomkins and the affect theories of psychoanalysis from Freud onward. Although at times Tomkins situates his writing as a corrective to Freud's—indeed, he opens his four-volume *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962–92) with a strong critique of the psychoanalytic theory of the drives—here, we are less interested in such polemics and the wrangling for authority that Freud's writing often provokes, and more in the productive, if sometimes uncomfortable, tensions between Tomkins and psychoanalysis. Keeping these affect theories in conversation with each other, we argue, refuses the easy gratifications of substitution (in which *The Chair* excelled) and it unsettles the agonistic satisfaction of setting one affect theory against another.

Our goal is primarily interpretive: we seek to place Tomkins's qualitatively differentiated affect system and his notion of imagery in conversation with Freud and his interpreters in the Kleinian tradition. And we are particularly interested in those tensions that can move us toward a contemporary critical epistemology that takes subjectivity, subjective experience, and political subjectivation into account. Continuing the project we pursued in *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook*, here we offer more explicit emphasis on selected writers within the psychoanalytic tradition. Although the chapter is focused on Tomkins and psychoanalytic thinkers, we see an opportunity for a broader intervention into the field of affect studies: what are the ways in which one affect theory, often referred to with the shorthand name "Tomkins" or "Freud" or "James" or "Darwin" or "Spinoza" or "Deleuze," is available to be read with other affect theories? How can we *use* each other? Use, not in the sense of mistreating each other but in the sense that Donald W. Winnicott (1953, 5) suggests when he shows how the infant uses the objects within its reach (breast, fist, sounds, or toys, each "excitedly loved and mutilated") to build an affectively robust world or how a patient comes to use the analyst as an object who will survive the patient's destructive fantasies (Winnicott 1969). As Barbara Johnson (2000, 273) notes, this kind of Winnicottian use creates "a space of play and risk that does not depend on maintaining intactness and separation."

### Surprise

Surprise is one of the affective responses that the use of Tomkins with psychoanalysis might invoke. In an eloquent essay about the notoriety of deconstructive reading, Barbara Johnson (2014, 331–32) argues that "a reading is strong . . . to the extent it encounters and propagates the surprise of otherness. The impossible but necessary task of the reader is to set herself up to be surprised." As we think about how to work with Tomkins and psychoanalysis, we find ourselves drawn to Johnson's appeal to surprise as a feature of reading. In their extended discussion of sex and unbearable negativity, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman also alight on surprise as an important part of how they have been reading their texts and reading each other. Edelman (Berlant and Edelman 2014, 120) notes the etymological links of *surprise*

to being seized, overtaken, or taken over and defines surprise psychoanalytically as “the encounter with what disrupts our expectations by breaking through the defensive barriers associated with routine.” Refusing to see psychoanalytically or deconstructively inclined criticism as a coolly intellectual encounter, Johnson and Berlant and Edelman each draw our attention to the affective jolt that a compelling reading can deliver.

Surprise is one of the nine basic affects that ground Tomkins’s theory. Most of these affects are defined by Tomkins as either positive (e.g., enjoyment-joy) or negative (e.g., anger-rage). Surprise, however, is neither. It is a resetting affect: “a general interrupter of ongoing activity” (Tomkins 1962, 498). Surprise is “similar in design and function to that in a radio or television network which enables special announcements to interrupt any ongoing program. It is ancillary to every other affect since it orients the individual to turn his attention from one thing to another. Whether, having been interrupted, the individual will respond with interest, or fear, or joy, or distress, or disgust, or shame, or anger will depend on the nature of the interrupting stimulus and on the interpretation given to it” (498). Surprise is a brief affective response and the experience of surprise, Tomkins suggests, is either mildly neutral or somewhat negative. In its more intense form, surprise becomes startle. Tomkins argues that the interruption of surprise, good or bad, will have the effect of resetting our minds and turning us in a new direction, cognitively and affectively. In this sense, surprise is disjunctive. At the same time, however, surprise is also combinatorial, binding one affective state to another. Tomkins notes that surprise is frequently confused with the affect that immediately follows it: the happy surprise of the early return of a loved one or the nasty surprise of the sudden arrival of someone we dread.

This understanding of surprise is in tension with, say, Edelman’s more psychoanalytically inclined use of surprise. Edelman recognizes that a surprise “is often unpleasant” (Berlant and Edelman 2004, 120), but he is oriented critically toward a different kind of negativity. Not the phenomenological negativity of bad feeling but the negativity that he has, relentlessly, associated with the death drive. Surprise is a signal, of sorts, for “the incessant pressure of what we continue not to know” (121). Johnson (2014, 331) also mobilizes surprise within a psychoanalytically oriented vocabulary: the surprise of *otherness*,

where otherness is referencing the unconscious or what she calls “the imperatives of the not-self.” It is clear that surprise as interruption (Tomkins) and surprise as otherness (psychoanalysis) are not the same thing, and under the care of Tomkins and Johnson and Edelman, these ideas move us in different directions. Importantly, however, Johnson’s phrase “the surprise of otherness” stalls the demand to choose between these different interpretations. Both disjunctive and combinatorial, “the surprise of otherness” indicates a critical space where interruption and otherness might be used together but without generating something like an affective-psychoanalytic synthesis—without, that is, resolving the tension between them. Both of us have argued for the value of Tomkins’s affect theory as an interruption to the monolithic and predictable readings that can be generated with classical Freudian theory. For example, one of us (AF) has suggested that there is benefit in reading not for a singular death drive but for “a variety of innate, negative affects, most of which are with the infant from birth, that threaten any more coherent or integrated sense of self: the rending cries of distress, the burning explosions of rage, the shrinking or vanishing compressions of terror, the transgression of the boundary between inside and outside the body in retching or disgust” (Frank 2006, 21). One of us (EW) has argued that understanding how the earliest digital computers were built requires something more than the routine Freudian-feminist indictment that these innovations are motivated by masculine envies for the capacity to biologically reproduce; instead of being substitutes for children, these machines are “sites of care and affection in their own right” (Wilson 2010, 49). Both of these readings, disputing classical Freudianism but never fully abandoning psychoanalysis or a curiosity about subjectivity and inner worlds, are attempting something like the Janus-faced surprise-otherness composite that Johnson has articulated.

Johnson has recommendations for the reader who would like to set herself up to be surprised by otherness. One could approach the impossible task of planning for a surprise by “transgressing one’s own usual practices, by indulging in some judicious time-wasting with what one does not know how to use, or what has fallen into disrepute” (Johnson 2014, 332). We advocate wasting some time with the affect theories that Tomkins and psychoanalytic theorists have produced—*affect theories that are still commonly held in disrepute for empirical,*

theoretical, and political reasons. The critical task for these readers is to remain open to surprise and, when having been interrupted and reoriented or having encountered the jolt of the not-self, read what happens next.

#### Affects/Drives

It is entirely unsurprising to note that the basic tension between Freud and Tomkins lies in their conceptualizations of the primary motives. For Tomkins, these are the affects, while for Freud, these are the drives (or instincts, in the *Standard Edition*'s translation). Yet for both theorists, drive and affect remain in the larger motivational picture as foundational concepts that lie on the border between the psyche and the soma. Tomkins insists that affects are physiological and describes them by way of specific bodily responses (expressions of fear, for example, may include eyes wide open, mouth agape, hair on end, and so on), but he also describes them in terms of a phenomenological gestalt—what fear feels like in awareness. Neither of these registers (the physiological, the phenomenological) is primary or exclusive in Tomkins's approach, and they clearly have a lot to do with each other. Similarly, in Freud's writing, we encounter a movement between the somatic and psychical: "'instinct' appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic, as the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body" (Freud 1915, 121–22).

As this reference to work implies, Freud is indebted to the nineteenth-century principle of the conservation of energy and the notion of homeostasis in its physiological applications (in, for example, Claude Bernard's notion of the *milieu interieur*). In "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," Freud unfolds an economics in which instinct is characterized by a constant pressure that the organism seeks to discharge or reduce and whose source is an internal bodily stimulus. This source is distinct from the instinct's aim (a reduction of tension from this source) as well as from its object (anything that helps to achieve this aim). In the case of the sexual instincts that Freud takes as model, objects are less significant than sources (the body's erogenous zones)

and aims (satisfaction or various forms of reversal, repression, and sublimation). Taken together, instinctual aims represent the individual's motivational field as it is charged by the organism's instinctual energy and discharged, diverted, or converted into psychical representatives of instinct: ideas and affects. For Freud, then, affects clearly derive from instinctual energy. He uses the term "quotas of affect," which Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (1988, 374) define as "a quantitative factor postulated as the substratum of affect as this is experienced subjectively."

This is the way Freud's thinking can appear when it takes the form of metapsychology or speculative theory. When he offers specific analyses, case studies, and discussions of technique, however, distinctive affective qualities of the object become important for interpretation. We are on the terrain that Paul Ricoeur (1970, 65) has explored in great detail, the powerful ambiguity in Freud's writing "which at times states conflicts of force subject to an energetics, at times relations of meaning subject to a hermeneutics." This seeming disjunction between force and language, a quantitative energetics versus a qualitative hermeneutics, is in part responsible for the remarkable influence of psychoanalysis in so many domains of twentieth-century thought (and Ricoeur is careful to observe how Freud requires both). Tomkins's (1962, 126–27) critique is of Freud's speculative energetics:

In his conception of motivation [Freud] attributed the urgency, innateness and time insistence of the drives to the Id, and at the same time he invested the Id with some but not all of the freer, more flexible attributes of the affect system. The Id was therefore at once an imperious, demanding, not to be put off investor of energy, and yet at the same time an investor who was capable of liquidating an investment, of seeking remote markets for investment when the immediate market was unfavorable, of even delaying an investment until a more profitable opportunity arose and of becoming a silent partner in any psychic enterprise. Had Freud not smuggled some of the properties of the affect system into his conception of the drives, his system would have been of much less interest than it was.

Tomkins's choice of metaphors to characterize the vicissitudes of instinct is no less indebted to Freud's nineteenth-century energetics than to postwar America's increasing grip on global markets. And his own theory, which offers an informatics of affect, is also oriented

by the technoscience of its moment: the fields of cybernetics, systems theory, and information theory (Frank and Wilson 2020).

Recall, for Tomkins the affect system serves to amplify and give urgency to the drives. The infant's cry of distress, for example, amplifies the discomfort of hunger and acts as a signal that registers an urgent need to both infant and caregiver, self and other. The affects can also inhibit the drives, such as when the shame associated with a specific sexual act inhibits its realization. By no means entirely dislinked from the drives, the affect system abides by different logics. Where the drives are temporally constrained by cycles of need and satisfaction associated with the homeostatic regulation of the organism's internal states and are intrinsically connected with objects (respiration requires oxygen, hunger requires nutrition), the affects are free with respect to time, density, and object. They are neither fundamentally homeostatic in function nor primarily oriented toward the interior of the organism, and they are redundant and contagious in a manner that the drives are not (your anxious need to breathe does not make me asphyxiate, although the intensity of your distress is likely to lead to mine). Affects motivate us by orienting perception or directing attention to whatever appears to be important at a given moment, whether internal or external to the organism, and in distinctive ways.

Clearly, Tomkins does not take the sex drive (or sexual instincts) as exemplary of the drives as such. For him, it is only in conjunction with the affect system's qualitatively distinct forms of amplification and inhibition that the sex drive can become sexuality, a larger motivational field characterized not only by force or energy (of desire, say) and interpretation or hermeneutics (the symbolization of desire) but by qualitatively differentiated information (joy, fear, disgust). Although the drives continue to play a crucial role in motivation, Tomkins's approach does not require their transformability through a libidinal economics of repression and sublimation—the sex drive is important but perhaps not all important. Instead, we have layers of biological specificity and an attention to affective signals, no less bodily. We are still left with the problem of moving between force and language, but now this problem is differently scaled and has a different topography, with language and motivation mutually imbricated in each other in a manner that raises questions of linguistic performativity.



## Abreaction

Tomkins is right, of course, that Freud attributed considerable motivational power to the drives and that although the affects “play a major role in his earlier papers,” they have a “successively smaller role as Psychoanalysis evolved” (Tomkins 1962, 6). But we do not want readers to think that affect theories are foreign to psychoanalysis. With this in mind, let us turn to one place where Freud does attend to the affects with some intensity: the 1895 *Studies in Hysteria*. Coauthored with Joseph Breuer and composed of an introductory essay, five case studies, six theoretical chapters, and a set of clinical techniques for the treatment of hysteria, the *Studies* are one of those places where qualitatively distinct affects are central to psychoanalytic theory. Here, the differences between, say, fear and shame and joy really matter for the efficacy of psychoanalytic interpretation.

Breuer and Freud coin a new term to explain the circumstances that have thrown their patients into hysterical states: *abreaction*; in German, *abreagieren*: to work off, to respond, to react (especially in the sense of a chemical reaction). The hysterical patient has been unable to abreact a major traumatic event or, more commonly, a series of minor but nonetheless emotionally intense episodes (“a whole story of suffering” [Freud 1893, 31]). Such responses could have been anything from “tears to acts of revenge” (Breuer and Freud 1895, 8). Without abreaction, however, the original affect (e.g., shock, distress, humiliation) remains attached to the memory of the event. Breuer and Freud found that these memories “persist for a long time with astonishing freshness and with the whole of their affective colouring” (9). The patient has been unable to dissipate the affective experience through processes of association which would have enabled the affect to be compared with other experiences and ideas that might contradict or rectify the impression left by the event. Indeed, these affectively cathected memories, deprived of the ameliorative effects of association, are cut off from other parts of the mind, splitting consciousness and generating the hypnoid states for which hysterics had become infamous. Treatment, Breuer and Freud contend, requires putting these feelings into words, allowing the strangulated affects to finally be abreacted via speech: the talking cure.

Abreaction and the cathartic method are commonly understood to be the kind of theory and the kind of treatment that Freud would

leave behind. Or in what amounts to the same thing, abreaction is important to the extent that it foreshadows what would come next. First abreaction, we might say, then psychoanalysis (the unconscious, dream analysis, Oedipus, drives). However, even as Freud was moving further away from the dynamics of strangled affect, some of his colleagues continued to pursue these concerns with some intensity. For example, in a series of notes about laughter made in 1913 (but published after his death), Sándor Ferenczi returns to the Freudian question of abreaction and is drawn to the physiology of the body and particularly the face as an important site for the production of affect. These notes begin in a familiar Freudian manner: “laughter is a failure of repression. A defense against unconscious pleasure” (Ferenczi [1913] 1955, 180). But then, in ways that would become increasingly important for Ferenczi clinically and personally, in ways that would put intolerable strain on his friendship with Freud and on his membership in the psychoanalytic establishment, in ways that would be very influential in psychoanalytic theory and treatment decades later, and in ways that look something like Tomkins’s affect theory, Ferenczi’s ([1913] 1955, 180–81) mind begins to branch out in multiple, new, contradictory, breathtaking directions:

I suggest that laughter consists of:

- (i) discharge of physical energy in Freud’s sense;
- (ii) compensation for this discharge by the respiratory muscles becoming the site of the discharge. (And the face muscles (?).)

Laughter is apparently a derivative of general muscle clonuses (and tonuses) which have become available for special purposes (aims). Just as expressive gestures arose from general reactions (cramps).

The respiratory muscular system is thus appropriate to the expression of emotions because it permits (i) abreaction, as well as (ii) different shades of feeling and delicate graduations of inhibition.

The face muscles are similarly adapted to the discharge of more delicate quantities of affect and at the same time to the regulation of breathing by the expansion and constriction of the openings of the nose and mouth (expansion = more pleasure breathed out. In weeping, sniveling movements).

These ruminations, more closely following the associative logics of his patients than the demands of published argument, are typical

of how Ferenczi innovated theoretically and clinically. His clinical diary, written in 1932 (almost forty years after the *Studies in Hysteria*), documents abreactive storms of considerable power not only in his patients but also in himself. In January 1932, in relation to the treatment of a significantly disturbed patient, RN, Ferenczi (1988, 26) records that his emotional response (“grief, shock, regret, breaking down with tears in the eyes”) to her stories of suffering corresponds with the first real therapeutic advance for RN: she is “permeated by a feeling that I have at last understood (that is, felt) her suffering” (26). In July of the same year, however, he notes that despite two years of abreactive work with RN, the “colossal outbursts of affect bearing every indication of terrible experiences” (168) have not brought about permanent change in her.

Rather than moving away from the importance of abreaction to clinical treatment (as did both Breuer and Freud), Ferenczi continued to innovate with both the content and the structure of the clinical session as a space where affects are worked off. One of the most notorious of these innovations was mutual analysis, where, in addition to the regular clinical hour, there was a second hour during which the analyst would lie on the couch and the patient would become the analyst (recall here Johnson’s interest in interpretive spaces that do not depend on intactness and separation). These experiments with affect and mutuality horrified the psychoanalytic establishment and were part of the reason why some of Ferenczi’s writings were withheld from publication for five decades after his death (Balint 1988). Ferenczi’s diaries and notes struggle to think about how something like affect, as Tomkins would define it (facial, differentiated, abreactable), and something like the unconscious, as Freud would define it (terrible, ideational, interpretable), can be read and experienced together. That these texts are fragmentary, and for many years notorious, suggests that Ferenczi gave himself no easy task. Eventually Ferenczi’s work was published in full and his experimentations with affect and mutuality have been read with increasing generosity (Dupont 1988; Harris and Kuchuck 2015; Haynal 2002; Rudnytsky 2022). Moreover, as classical Freudianism dispersed in the latter half of the twentieth century (Kleinianism, Lacanianism, the British middle school, self-psychology, relational psychoanalysis) and as many practitioners brought empirical methods to bear on psychoanalytic principles, the

dynamics of affect so lucidly described in the *Studies on Hysteria* became important considerations once again. For these post-Freudian thinkers, theories of affect stand in some tension with the classical psychoanalytic idea that the vicissitudes of the drive should be our central clinical or theoretical concern. Some of these writers try to resolve this tension, but the more compelling of these texts (e.g., Beebe et al. 2005; Bowlby 1969; Fonagy et al. 2002; Tronick 2007) are able to tolerate the strain of thinking with both the affects and the unconscious, and use that discomfort to generate important new work on the vitality of subjective states.

Klein

We briefly take up one of these dispersions of Freudianism here whose direction was, in part, oriented by Ferenczi's thinking. According to the writers of *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, Melanie Klein "did not adhere to the conservation principle of (emotional) energy" (Spillius et al. 2011, 317) and did not make much use of Freud's economic model even as she relied on and revised his developmental, topographical, and structural models. Klein's relentlessly dynamic conception of the psyche, her emphasis on the *object* of instinct, not only its aim and source (hence *object relations*), and her unfolding of phantasy as the psychic representative of instinct, "seem to foreground the current interest in communication theory concerned with the distribution of information. Like information, phantasies of relationships with objects are not subject to a law of conservation" (317). As Eve Sedgwick and one of us (AF) have argued, Tomkins's approach to a qualitatively differentiated affect system is more compatible with Kleinian object relations than with Freudian energetics (e.g., Frank 2015; Sedgwick 2007).

The tension that we would like to explore here is between Tomkins's understanding of imagery and the concept of *introjection* in object relations theory. Ferenczi introduced this concept into the psychoanalytic literature in the essay "Introjection and Transference" (1909) where he defines it by analogy with projection: "Whereas the paranoiac expels from his ego the impulses that have become unpleasant, the neurotic helps himself by taking into the ego as large as possible a part of the outer world, making it the object of unconscious phantasies" (Ferenczi [1909] 1952, 47). Characteristically, Ferenczi exerts

depathologizing pressure on these concepts (“the paranoiac projection and the neurotic introjection are merely extreme cases of psychical processes the primary forms of which are to be demonstrated in every normal being” [48]), and both Freud and Karl Abraham take up introjection in writing on grief and melancholia. Klein, who underwent analyses with both Ferenczi and Abraham, integrated the notion of introjection into her own case studies and speculative writing. In “Personification in the Play of Children,” for example, Klein (1929) discusses the introjection of helpful or terrifying imagos and the conditions under which these may synthesize or fail to be synthesized as the superego. In Klein’s careful and detailed account, the ego is involved in the work of addressing intrapsychic conflict (between id and superego), work that involves the introjection and projection of contrasting imagos, attempts to synthesize these, and splitting. She concludes that “this splitting of the super-ego into the primal identifications introjected at different stages of development is a mechanism analogous to and closely connected with projection. I believe these mechanisms (splitting-up and projection) are a principal factor in the tendency to personification in play” (205). Like Ferenczi, Klein understands the behavior of neurotic children to be continuous with everyday non-neurotic experience such as play.

The psychoanalytic concept of imago is very close to Tomkins’s concept of imagery, a crucial element in his cybernetic account. Imagery, for Tomkins, emerges from bidirectional information duplication in humans (and other animals), efforts to match afferent (incoming) sensory, motor, or other information with efferent (outgoing) central feedback. The child’s images of a parent’s terrorizing or comforting face and voice are at once perceived and constructed and fit well with the idea of imago, as Laplanche and Pontalis (1988, 211) define it: “Unconscious prototypical figure which orientates the subject’s way of apprehending others; it is built up on the basis of the first real and phantasied relationships within the family environment.” Like imagery, which Tomkins characterizes in terms of all sorts of sensory, memory, and motor information, imagos are not reducible to the visual sense (“Feelings and behaviour, for example, are just as likely to be the concrete expressions of the imago as are mental images” [211]). Like imagos, imagery is the result of both introjection and projection since it emerges from a central matching mechanism that selects and integrates afferent and

effluent flows of information that become images (of a parent's face and voice in this example). Klein (1929, 204) captures the sense in which imagos are both introjective and projective when she asserts, "The imagos adopted in this early phase of ego-development bear the stamp of the pregenital instinctual impulses, although they are actually constructed on the basis of the real Oedipal objects." Klein uses Freud's energetics ("instinctual impulses") to identify the internal constitutional source of the imago but insists that the imago itself is "constructed on the basis of" sensory experience of the parents.

In psychoanalysis, imagos are by definition unconscious, although they can be brought into conscious awareness (when reading Klein, one gets the sense that, at least for children at play, unconscious imagos are not entirely inaccessible). For Tomkins, imagery becomes conscious in the "central assembly," a collection of conscious reports that are functionally related to a central matching mechanism. In his complex account, consciousness becomes "a semistable psychological structure" (Tomkins 1992, 306) that is constantly being assembled and disassembled in relation to what information is centrally matched, and this process of matching is itself a skill of selective attention. It strikes us that Freud's (1900, 615) famous early definition of consciousness as "a sense-organ for the perception of psychical qualities" may be redescribed in terms of such skills of central matching. This tension between (largely conscious) imagery and (largely unconscious) imagos offers a promising avenue for thinking about inhibition, not in terms of a repressed libidinal energetics but an affective informatics of object relations. This tension opens up a conceptualization of repression as, in large part, a function of the affect system.

### Conclusion

We could continue to pursue similar tensions between Tomkins's writing and other psychoanalytic thinkers in the Kleinian and post-Kleinian tradition. For example, one of us (AF) has found Wilfrid Bion's theory of thinking useful for critical purposes and it would be productive to bring Bion into conversation with Tomkins on "the minding system." But rather than pursue this, we would prefer to conclude with some thoughts about how the tensions we have already described above might help us to reconsider questions of political

subjectivation, specifically with regard to an epistemological quandary. One version of this quandary appears at the start of “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” where Freud (1915, 117) meditates briefly on the status of definitions in science:

We have often heard it maintained that sciences should be built up on clear and sharply defined basic concepts. In actual fact no science, not even the most exact, begins with such definitions. The true beginning of scientific activity consists rather in describing phenomena and then in proceeding to group, classify and correlate them. Even at this stage of description it is not possible to avoid applying certain abstract ideas to the material in hand, ideas derived from somewhere or other but certainly not from the new observations alone. Such ideas—which will later become the basic concepts of the science—are still more indispensable as the material is further worked over.

Freud asserts the impossibility of a purely observational science, one that is utterly free of the impositions (“from somewhere or other”) of abstraction or theory, but he never rejects the need to revise these ideas in the face of empirical evidence. In this opening paragraph, he points to the “indefiniteness” of these basic concepts and their particular status: “they are in the nature of conventions—although everything depends on their not being arbitrarily chosen but determined by their having significant relations to the empirical material, relations that we seem to sense before we can clearly recognize and demonstrate them” (117).

The nonarbitrary convention that has “significant relations to the empirical material”—does it not seem as if this useful, fundamental concept has gone missing in the polarizing amplifications of contemporary popular epistemology? Here is a frustrating example, a snapshot from recent experience: a colleague asserts at a (Zoom) department meeting that the university and regional authorities are not doing enough with regard to the pandemic (this despite a robust vaccine rollout, mandatory vaccine declarations, and ongoing public health measures). When it is pointed out that the number of reported infections is fairly low and shows signs of decreasing, the colleague asserts that the numbers are low because of a lack of testing. We are left with a basic disagreement, not simply about the facts (Is the virus actually in decline in the population?) but about evidence, authority,



and power (How reliable are the daily case number reports? Can we ascertain whether there is a concerted governmental effort to reduce testing out of complacency or in order to maintain control over an anxious population?). We are left with a quandary: how to adjudicate between a seemingly naive trust in the reported data and a rejection of this trust that appears to dismiss the possibility of expertise?

If this example is reminiscent of what Eve Sedgwick identified many years ago as the emotional dispositions associated with Kleinian positions (depressive and paranoid-schizoid), perhaps Tomkins's notion of imagery may help to fine-tune this discussion. For imagery is the very ground of the relation between theory and perception, an epistemological grounding that takes place at both relatively higher and lower cognitive levels: both at the sophisticated level of how to understand numerical data related to pandemic infection rates and at the more visceral level of how to interpret an angry or caring face and voice. No doubt, we all have parental imagos that guide our responses to authority, but we also have more complex images of science, of government, and of the university, and these images are accompanied by criteria for what should (and should not) count as evidence, facts, and power. In other words, our abstract ideas are composed of conscious and unconscious images, a result of a central matching mechanism that constructs them out of sensory data and memory, and which is motivated by specific affective structures.

If analysis of ideology does not seem to be working very well these days to de-escalate polarizing opposition (to put it mildly), we wonder whether it would be possible to think about, explore, and analyze abstract ideas in relation to the images and affects that compose them. This is not to recommend a return to psychoanalytic reductionism, as if this were a viable alternative to what is much more common today, an intensive sociological reductionism. It is, rather, to keep in mind the possibility that our abstract ideas no longer have "significant relations to the empirical material" and so can and should be changed. Freud (1915, 124) discusses this possibility with regard to the indefinite concept of instinct itself, his main object of speculation in the essay: "I am altogether doubtful whether any decisive pointers for the differentiation and classification of the instincts can be arrived at on the basis of working over the psychological material. This working-over seems rather itself to call for the application to the



material of definite assumptions concerning instinctual life, and it would be a desirable thing if those assumptions could be taken from some other branch of knowledge and carried over to psychology.” Freud awaits empirical support from biology and expects Darwinian ideas to justify his emphasis on sexuality. Meanwhile, his interpreters in the Kleinian tradition revised his notion of instinct and adapted it to various clinical encounters (for example, with children and with schizophrenic patients). Here, we propose that Tomkins’s partly empirical, partly speculative approaches to affect and imagery can play a productive role in tension with Freud and these interpreters and offer avenues for an affective analysis of what sets so many of us at odds.

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