

Genres of Listening: An Ethnography of Psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires. Xochitl Marsilli-Vargas. Duke University Press. 2022, 248 pp.

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Anthropology and psychoanalysis have a somewhat ambiguous relationship. Psychological (or medical) anthropology generally concerns itself with connections between mental health, illness, and cultural change, while psychoanalysis focuses more on individual meaning and experience to capture the tension between environmental adaptation and personal freedom. Anthropological studies that employ psychoanalysis as a method seek to understand people's inner lives through cultural symbols, contributing to our thinking about and transcending the dualism of "individual" and "society" (Obeyesekere 1990; Fortis 2018). Some scholars emphasize complementarity between these two disciplines (Deluz and Heald 1994). In *Genres of Listening: An Ethnography of Psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires*, Xochitl Marsilli-Vargas has made a breakthrough by bridging these two fields, offering readers a fresh perspective on understanding mental health services in the contexts of South American history and psychoanalytically related linguistic practices.

This ethnography explores therapeutic cultural practices that have developed in an urban society under the premise of embracing modernity. The author does not treat psychoanalysis as mere theory but focuses on its operational forms and those who use it. The book offers interdisciplinary theoretical interpretations of psychoanalysis, introduces its connection to Argentina's modern history, and explains how psychoanalysis permeates that nation's sociocultural life. The ethnography regards psychoanalysis as a specific linguistic genre and highlights "listening" as a core cultural practice in Argentines' social interactions.

At the outset, the author takes concepts from linguistics, semiotics, and musicology to elucidate the characteristics of listening. Marsilli-Vargas observes that Buenos Aires residents possess, willfully or not, a unique ability to engage in this mode of listening. Starting from a conversation in a taxi, she notices the distinct interactive pattern of "When you say X, I hear Y" in the way people in Buenos Aires converse. By applying Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic concepts, Marsilli-Vargas

explains the psychoanalytic listening style and, through the concept of resonance as conceived by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, highlights the echoing nature of sound between signifier(s) and signified(s). She understands these sonic interactions as a form of listening.

The practice of psychoanalysis in the city of Buenos Aires itself creates opportunities for Marsilli-Vargas to engage in long-term observational research. Starting in 1960, the Multi-Family Structure Therapeutic Psychoanalytic (MFSTP) model replaced the highly secretive therapeutic setting. The author explores how Buenos Aires became a “city of listeners” by observing interactions between therapists and patients in therapeutic contexts. She compares these to cultural practices in everyday life and examines how psychoanalytic theories entered Argentine society and were propagated through academic institutions. Another notable aspect of this ethnography is the devotion of an entire chapter to demonstrating how psychoanalysis transcends the therapy room and becomes part of popular culture through extensive media exposure, including television programs, newspaper columns, comic books, and advertisements. It is worth mentioning that the author wrote this book during the Covid-19 lockdown period when she observed how the pandemic advanced the legitimacy of psychoanalytic practices because it made people value the need for mutual listening even more.

The author identifies the operational forms of psychoanalysis as a kind of language logic, a work of linguistic anthropology. However, when reading this book, readers may find themselves curious about the use of language in the postcolonial Argentine society. Postcolonial subjectivity, manifested in the intertwined relationships between colonizers and colonized subjects, shapes people’s fantasies, emotions, and belief systems (Treacher 2005). It has also become the subject of scrutiny in medical anthropology (Good and Good 2007). Readers may want to know more about how a cultural path makes possible the emergence of a collective subjectivity. Even though the author attempts to explain that the people of Buenos Aires, an urban community of immigrants, have a melancholic character or motherless anxiety, this argument still lacks conviction.

The author asserts that “race is a powerful lens for understanding how specific ideologies and social biases circulate within listening practices” (2022: 92). She suggests that psychoanalysis among the people of Argentina is rooted in a modern subjectivity. In a postcolonial society, though, does this subjectivity face particular contradictions? Can we infer that psychoanalysis, a Western cultural authority widely accepted by the public, symbolizes a practice of self-decolonization in a postcolonial society? Lakoff (2006) argues that medicalization, intertwined with cultural colonialism, entails the purposeful actions of the colonizer and the acquiescence of those who permit

themselves to be colonized, however, this process also encounters some resistance, including psychoanalytic culture and anti-capitalist perspectives. Marsilli-Vargas's book implies that people must, in their process of mutual listening, construct a new subjectivity through a form that transcends colonial languages. If psychoanalysis is seen as a solution to people's desire that their social suffering be heard, even though this aspect of the current social situation is not heavily emphasized in the book, it could be a supplementary explanation for "why" psychoanalysis has become popular. In other words, psychoanalysis may become a means of resistance, using new cultural practices (a new embodied linguistic form) to resist ongoing social suffering that people experience or the various social contradictions they face in a postcolonial context.

Psychoanalysis prevails and circulates in Argentina, primarily in the Spanish language. However, readers may ask whether, even when using Spanish, there are linguistic nuances and usage patterns unique to Argentine society. My answer to this question stems from my observations of cultural practices among Taiwan's Indigenous peoples. Different Indigenous groups in Taiwan have varying degrees of proficiency in Mandarin Chinese. There are distinct characteristics in their use of Chinese, such as punning, employing inverted syntactical structures, and making jokes. There seems to be the intention to deliberately respond with "Y" when someone says "X." These linguistic practices appear to involve a distortion of and resistance to the hegemony of the dominant language—Chinese—partly stemming from their historical oppression, sociocultural marginalization, and language deprivation. Language acquisition and socialization are often the subject of research interest in linguistic anthropology. With Taiwanese Indigenous tongues, distortion and resistance are readily observable. As a reader, I am interested in whether similar phenomena also exist in Argentine society.

This book expands the ways medical anthropology and creative writing can come together. Rather than focusing on human suffering, Marsilli-Vargas focuses on sound and human psychic structures, extracting the evidence of a unique cultural practice from language interactions. Because the book leans more toward linguistic anthropological analyses, the discussion of social context in Buenos Aires is somewhat lacking. The author openly acknowledges how psychoanalysis spills over into domains beyond therapy and her primary concern is "how" rather than "why" it happens. Still, the lack of an explanation for "why" is a weakness worth noting. To date, there is a growing body of anthropological research on how specific forms of psychotherapy have become popular in particular societies, such as Jungian analysis in Japan (Kitanaka 2003), psycho-boom in China (Huang 2015), or mindfulness therapy in the UK (Cook 2023), where processes involve unique journeys of appropriating foreign cultures to local purposes, which become widely accepted based on the driving forces specific

to the histories, politics, and socio-cultural contexts of those societies. Furthermore, healthcare systems established under specific political and economic conditions may determine the mainstream practice paradigms—Taiwan's National Health Insurance (NHI) or the UK's National Health Service (NHS) are good examples.

What is noteworthy for Taiwanese readers is that Taiwan, as a nation emerging from a postcolonial society and embracing modernity, exhibits diverse psychological states and healthcare behaviors. Taiwan does not have a single mainstream therapeutic form. However, it is undeniable that certain cultural practices have become popular outside therapy rooms and are deeply embedded in mass media, e.g., astrology and tarot reading. Taiwanese society has been traversing the loss of languages, cultural breakdown, and knowledge conflicts. Although the language of psychoanalysis is not widespread in Taiwan, professional communities are still dedicated to its promotion. The circulation of and resistance to these concepts and practices are closely tied to the unique cultural background of contemporary society and have a definite connection to Taiwan's specific history. Even though the book does not explicitly engage postcolonial theory, it is highly recommended for Taiwanese readers who are interested in healthcare phenomena in postcolonial or settler-colonial contexts.

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