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Muriel Dimen: Teacher, Mentor, Psychoanalytic Scholar

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ABSTRACT

This essay is split in content and intent. In the first part, I share my reflections from my long personal relationship with Muriel Dimen, who taught, supervised, and mentored me as a young candidate and beginning scholar. In this part, I try convey how staunch and thorough her commitment, how extraordinary her generosity was in supporting the intellectual development of a new generation of emerging psychoanalytic thinkers and theorists.

The second part, written in an entirely different tone, takes on the body of work Dimen produced in the last decade of her life, which focused on sexual boundary violations. This work highlights the hybridity of her thinking and the brilliance of her mind. I flesh out the genealogy of her reflections on this topic and discuss in some depth how her last, posthumously published paper changes the terms of the conversation in this very difficult matter. In this topic, as she had previously done in many others, Dimen's contribution introduced an entirely novel way to think about the recalcitrant problem of sexual abuses in the consulting room.

When I was invited to contribute an essay to this issue marking Muriel Dimen's passing and commemorating her legacy I felt incredibly torn. I struggled between two registers, each of which captured something critical about her: Muriel had been my supervisor, my teacher, my mentor, and eventually an intimate friend. And there was also Dr. Dimen, the extraordinary scholar whose significant contributions to psychoanalysis deeply influenced generations of psychoanalysts. Neither could be left out; neither told a full story without the supplement of the other. I have taken the liberty to speak to both, organizing my essay in two distinct parts entirely different in tone and content. Together they convey the generosity of her mentorship and the brilliance of her contributions.

Part 1: Personal reflections. Muriel Dimen as teacher and mentor

I first met Muriel at my psychoanalytic institute's orientation when I was a beginning candidate. I approached her with equal measures of novice deference and wide-eyed admiration. Muriel had a deep fondness for Greece, where she had done part of her anthropological research, and her eyes lit up when she realized I was born and raised there. That's how our relationship started: a mixture of veneration and coincidence. Over the years we traveled from her being my invaluable supervisor, to my daring teacher, to my firm and loving mentor, to my really close friend. We finally settled to a form of kinship that I experienced as family. Throughout our friendship Muriel would sometimes speak to me in Greek. Depending on the occasion, it could be about signaling intimacy whereas at other times, it was more conspiratorial mischief like when she wanted to say something that those dining at the table next to us were better off not hearing. Many of those who knew her intimately have felt that from her. To be loved by Muriel meant that she could speak to you in your own language, that she could take on your emotional dialect.

Muriel sprinkled a dash of her magic on me. A year into my being supervised by her, Muriel made a passing reference to feminism. Looking back on it now, I know that it couldn't have really taken a

whole year to reference feminism and that it was probably *I*, who had been entirely illiterate in these matters, first heard and registered it. But it must have also been the first time that *she* realized my ignorance. Trying to suppress her disbelief she asked, “You’ve heard of Gloria Steinem, right? You studied feminism in college, yes?” Embarrassed by my ignorance, I mumbled something about how in the Greece I had grown up *feminism* had been a dirty word and that *I*, in fact, knew exactly zero about it. She became concerned. “You won’t be able to do *anything* without feminism,” she told me affectionately. The statement sounded exaggerated to me but I stayed quiet. I knew enough to know that I was too naïve about what she might mean to be able to assess the accuracy of her claim. She stared at me, her mind running a mile a minute as it often did. And then, she matter-of-factly shrugged her shoulders as if she was left with no other choice and said, “Well, I guess I’ll just have to teach it to you.” Two weeks later an announcement appeared at our professional Listserve that she was forming a reading group on the foundations of feminist theory. There were two people in that group (myself included) but she ran it for 2 years anyway. She reached out to colleagues who taught feminist theory to undergrads and got their syllabi to assemble a beginner’s reading list. She taught us the feminist canon while finding ways to delight in rediscovering texts that she had heavily underlined decades ago. Muriel was like that as a teacher: determined, dedicated and undeterred by the obstacles posed by how much labor her help would require.

Muriel sprinkled a dash of her magic on a new generation of analytic theorists. Several years ago, I joined a writing group she led.¹ The group was an exercise in enchantment and I want to tell you why. You would come to the group, an anxious newbie, and want to talk about your conflicts about writing, about the anxiety that overtook you and left the page blank. And Muriel would steer you away from talking about your feelings or your anxiety—a move entirely unanalytic and, as I was to discover, invaluable. Muriel was intent on focusing us less on our feelings and more on the act of writing. Now for anyone reading this who is not a psychoanalyst, this may make instant sense, but in analytic circles where feelings and process are our most elementary units of thinking, discouraging an engagement with one’s emotional experience was, to say the very least, surprising. Instead, Muriel would orient us to the task at hand and to *doing*: “Bring anything, bring a paragraph, bring a sentence, bring only a word,” she would say. To her the point was not to bring in developed thoughts or texts; the point of the group was the process. The truth is that, as far as I can recall, nobody brought just a word. But some of us would e-mail the group before the next meeting with a few sentences or a couple of disjointed paragraphs, incomplete thoughts gesturing toward a gestalt the contours of which the author could not yet apperceive.

Muriel would then open the writing group meeting with her signature sentence: “What help do you need from us?” (Dimen, 2011, p. 5). This credo established anew each time that we were there to help the author and to do so as a collective. It highlighted that as the prospective author you got to define what you needed and, by implication, what you didn’t—that the process was yours and yours alone and that it was not to be taken over by anyone else’s ideas or conceptual objections. Muriel made sure that we all remembered what was being asked of us—and by implication, what was not. So when you got it in your mind that your colleague was going off track and that she should be drawing more on, say, Marx when she was clearly not interested in considering class dynamics, Muriel would matter-of-factly reign you in and remind you that that was *not* the help the author asked for.

Muriel had the talent of reading through a paper and knowing what the author was struggling to approximate even when the rest of us heard in the background only the echoes of the author’s personal struggle with past and with life. But she had a sense of how that which would otherwise have been mere emotional debris could be turned into a contribution. Muriel insisted—and eventually convinced us—that words that to the author felt as if they were merely strung together could—if the author persisted—accrue enough density to turn into a theoretical point. She would fish into our paragraphs for that special hidden word or sentence and exclaim, “*There! That’s your idea. That’s what you are trying to say.*” Sensing our fear,

¹At the time I joined the group was comprised of Orna Guralnik, Glenys Lobban, Olga Pugachevsky, Eyal Rozmarin, and Maura Sheehy. Stephen Hartman, one of the members of the original group, had recently relocated to San Francisco and left the group whereas Tracy Simon joined the group a few months later. This, of course, was only one of a few such writing groups that Muriel ran over the years. All these groups nourished the development of important analytic thinkers who have authored significant papers—some of which were published in the volume edited by Dimen (2011).

she taught us how to recognize it in ourselves. It was from her that I learned that when one is afraid of their ideas they build a heap of theory, almost like a fortress, before they spell them out and then, even then, one often does so timidly, dropping it in as the paper is drawing to an end but without exploring it or giving the reader time with it. “This is you being afraid,” she’d interpret, “you are afraid that what you have to say will not be taken seriously. Or that once you say it you will have nowhere to go. And you actually don’t. You’ll only know what you are trying to say after you write it!” Muriel believed that one sets out to write one paper and ends up writing another, that we work out our ideas in the act of writing rather than, as beginning authors think, that we write to express already crystallized thoughts. And she knew—although I don’t think she’d ever put it that way as this was not her idiom—that ending rather than leading with one’s ideas was defensive. So she’d often direct us to “take your idea from the end of the paragraph where you’ve buried it and put it at the beginning. Start out with it. Say it clearly.” And while this was unfolding, she’d then instruct others, “Stop talking, let her write this down,” and she’d wait and make others wait while you would furiously jot down notes.

At the time we thought we were taking notes on a particularly crisp phrase or, on a clearer insight as to what we were trying to say. Looking back on it now, though, I think that what we were writing was “*This is what it’s like to be found.*” Muriel knew how to come looking for you and she knew how to find you. And she knew how to draw you out by making you feel that you, little you, had something to say and that *she* was interested, that *the group* was interested and that if you let yourself say it, the *whole world* might be interested too. So sometimes you’d leave that group feeling that you alone could personally conquer the intellectual universe. And when you came down from this drunken state, Muriel was there to tell you with integrity what about it didn’t work and exactly how far you had spun out. I remember the first paper I finished. I had rewritten it seven times. I sent it to her thinking that I must be mostly done and eagerly awaited her feedback: I know now that I was hoping for a pat on the back. “You are in for a few rewrites,” she said to me soberly. Her tone was matter-of-fact—the implication being that this is what the process was *supposed* to be—and with a clarity and definitiveness that indicated that she had faith that I would, actually, be up for the task. I was as crestfallen as I was compelled. Part of the gift of being taught by Muriel meant that she didn’t treat you as fragile. Eventually some of that rubbed off on us; we came to be able to do that for each other and over a lengthier period of time even a bit for ourselves. Of course, her method yielded results. All of us in that group published work and several of us have been writing consistently and for years. It started with Muriel.

On the level of the work it would be accurate to say that Muriel gave us her attention. On the level of the experience it would be more accurate, to borrow a phrase from Eyal Rozmarin (personal communication, February 16, 2016), to say that Muriel raised us. She raised us to be thinkers but she also raised us to appreciate the power of the collective, to recognize that collectivity is as critical as individuality, a critical insight that psychoanalysis does not teach. Muriel was encouraging of our individual ideas but she was always staunchly on the side of the collective. On one particular occasion an issue arose in our writing group about what idea belonged to whom; did it start with the person whose text we were working on or did it belong to the person who first formulated it as an answer to a collective query? In an environment of intellectual cross-pollination that was, as you can imagine, also quite competitive it can be hard to know in whose particular mind an idea originated. I asked Muriel about this conundrum in private—“Whose idea was it really?” “That’s not the right framework,” she said to me, “you can’t build borders around ideas and call them yours—ideas emanate from one but they really arise in a collective.” As an anthropologist, Muriel believed very deeply in the power of the group and in the functioning of the collective. Her persistence on this frustrated us but it also bonded us to each other. When she passed, she left behind a group of intellectual siblings.

Part 2: Professional reflections. Muriel Dimen on sexual boundary violations as a problem of the psychoanalytic collective

Dimen’s interest in collectivity and group dynamics was most prominently theorized in the thinking and writing she did in the last decade of her life. Here is a short genealogy of that process to help

situate what I focus on to discuss her intellectual contribution, her very last paper, which was published posthumously in 2015.

Starting in 2005, Dimen turned her attention to thinking about sexual boundary violations. This work started out with the publication of a breakthrough paper (Gabbard, 2015) wherein she described her treatment with her first analyst—whom she called Dr. O—and the sexual transgression that occurred in the course of that analysis (Dimen, 2011). Dimen effectively rewrote the discursive protocols for this very tortured topic and did so by speaking from both sides of the couch, as both analyst and analysand. This was a first. Dimen not only recounted but, more important, she also demonstrated by means of her dexterously theorized personal narrative the importance of not turning a deaf ear to the thudding “sound of silence” (Dimen, 2011, p. 39) around sexual infractions. These silences, she insisted, occur under the auspices of massive denial and dissociation, processes that frequently underwrite sexual transgressions and which manifest in the analyst/analysand dyad as well as on the institutional level (Wallace, 2007; Ruskin, 2011). Dimen’s 2011 paper was met with a variety of responses by our professional community: alarm, tumult, intellectual excitement, blame, curiosity, anger, sorrow, despair, and of course gossip. Dimen became intensely curious about the disturbance her paper produced on the level of the group, in her colleagues and professional organizations (see Dimen and Amrhein, 2017) and conceptualized it as being symptomatic of larger group dynamics that may be at the heart of the persistent and recalcitrant problem of sexual boundary violations.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of discourses around boundary violations as occurring under the aegis of group dynamics (e.g., Elise, 2015; Gabbard, 2016)—some of which were mobilized by Dimen’s contributions, to which I return shortly. Dimen, however, stands alone in her innovative approach to clinical sexual abuses as having to do with the group as a social structure with embedded, at times entrenched, systems of negotiating power. In the last paper she wrote, *Rotten Apples and Ambivalence: Sexual Boundary Violations Through a Psychocultural Lens* (2016), Dimen argued that idealization of psychoanalysis is a frailty built into the very psychopolitical fabric of our clinical craft. Welding together psychoanalytic theory with anthropology, she proposed that sexual boundary violations could be profitably rethought not only as a matter that belongs to the dynamics of the clinical dyad but also as one that pertains to group dynamics. She fleshed out two specific factors: the idealization of psychoanalysis as a clinical method and the field’s refusal to contend with the fact that the psychoanalytic situation invites the emergence of a sexual field that can then not be acted upon.

The implication of Dimen’s remarkable insight that sexual boundary violations are also “a problem of the group” is that sexual abuses in the consulting room cannot be sufficiently addressed by attending only to intrapsychic or dyadic factors. Interventions on the level of psychoanalysis as a field and as a discipline are also necessary. Dimen’s call to psychoanalysts to rethink how we engage the enduring problem of sexual abuses in clinical praxis (Dimen, 2011) in this way pries open previously unthought space. The problem, Dimen helped us understand, is not one of conscious and unconscious life alone but also a “social matter.” A certain kind of idealization is necessary, Dimen proposed by way of Mary Douglas’ work (1966), if we are to keep the stigma and dirt that trails sexual violations outside our field and most of us safely ensconced in the ostensibly unpolluted, clean interiority of psychoanalysis. Every time a transgressing analyst is thrown out of our analytic communities as a bad apple we are all on the level of the group working to cement a disavowal: to unknow that there is something inherently “crazy making,” to use Dimen’s phrase, in a profession, *our* profession, that invites the creation of an intimate, sexual field and then organizes that very field around the proscription of sexual relations.

Dimen’s contribution added this remarkable new dimension to the sophisticated knowledge on sexual boundary violations that has accrued through meticulous work gifted to us by analysts like Glen Gabbard (1994a,b, 2015, 2016; Gabbard and Lester, 1995) and Andrea Celenza (1998, 2007, 2010, 2015, forthcoming). The notion that sexual boundary violations can now be also understood to be a property of the group is a startling and powerful claim, one that, Dimen warned, will be met with resistance: we will not want to know that the container, psychoanalysis that is, is itself tainted because we will want to preserve our beloved profession as an unadulterated good object, as idealized, pure, and uncontaminated. “Analytic intoxication,” she boldly wrote, does not “particularly draw the attention of training programs

and supervision” (Dimen, 2016, p. 577). Throughout her paper Dimen alludes to how the group, to how all of us, will need to be persuaded that sexual acting out has to be also tackled as a communally created problem. Dimen’s proposition recalls Bion’s (1961) insight that groups have to do a lot of work before they can begin to appreciate that the source of their distress is not external but that it, in fact, originates from within (on this dynamic in the context of Dimen’s work see also Gabbard, 2016).

“It’s hard,” Dimen emphasized, “to have a thoughtful conversation about this aspect of [psychoanalytic] group life” (Dimen, 2016, p. 362) but hard though it may be, what Dimen offered are also the tools for a difficult, yes, but also for a hopeful conversation, one that can help loosen a bit the firm grip of our idealization so that we might begin to think about what I am proposing is an ambivalent relationship to psychoanalysis’ conflicting injunctions. This softening of idealization of course entails a loss. We have to abdicate, as analysts, the false but reassuring security that underwrites all idealizations. But it is, as well, a promise; it comes with an increased sense of responsibility toward each other, which also means that we might also expect more of each other. It moves the discussion on boundary violations away from superego chastisements and toward thinking of the prevention of sexual breaches as requiring that we all, as clinicians and colleagues, function to protect each other, that we move toward collective-care. This is, to me, one of the most profound implications of Dimen’s paper.

Let me now momentarily turn my attention to psychoanalysis’ complex relationship to sexuality in the consulting room. Dirt, Dimen tells us, is not a thing in itself but it is, rather, always relative to what is seen as clean; dirt, as she quotes Douglas to have said, is “matter out of place.” Takes shoes, for instance; Douglas explains, “Shoes are not dirty in themselves but it is dirty to place them on the dining table” (as quoted in Dimen, 2016 p. 366).

It took Freud, as we know, some time to realize that the patient’s sexual desire for the analyst is not “matter out of place” at all. In his seminal paper on transference love (1915) he noted that erotic transference not only belongs but also is actually oftentimes a necessary ingredient in an analytic treatment. The issue of the analyst’s desire, however, remains more vexed. We do, of course, have a voluminous and nuanced body of literature that speaks to the analyst’s erotic feelings. We call it *erotic countertransference* and it is the theoretical space we have allocated for the exploration of the analyst’s sexual responses. Most often, however, erotic countertransference takes up the analyst’s erotic affect as an iatrogenic phenomenon. Erotic countertransference is to be reflected upon for its meanings, mined as a carrier of unconscious transmissions of the patient’s primitive states. And indeed, when attended to carefully, such countertransferences can help the analyst grasp what’s activated in the intersect of her and her patient’s psychic worlds so she can make clinical use of it.

But what Dimen’s final contribution helps me formulate is that we are lacking honest and frank conversations about the phenomenology of some of these experiences that may not just feed on intersubjective processes. I am speaking about the analyst’s sexual feelings, which live and breathe on the level of the body, which are more untamed and shot through by the inherent unruliness that pervades eroticism, of feelings that come with the pressure that protests delay and which insist on “now,” of feelings that lure one to disregard consequences and implications and just act. That is the kind of experience that is psychic matter out of place, dirty and unspeakable unless it is subjected first to the cleansing process that diminishes its vigor and intensity and which transforms it into the more dignified language of a clinical phenomenon. Are these rogue sexual states *in the analyst* matter out of place? I want to clarify that I am not speaking here of action; neither am I referring to an inability to reflect on such states or treatments capsized by the incapacity to sit with such intense emotions. I am speaking mostly of the ways in which we tend to clean up our language and sanitize our discussions around the analyst’s attractions and in-love feelings, about how we permit these discussions only in the most flat and aseptic language. Speaking in frank and direct ways feels quite dirty indeed. Matter out of place.

The notion of dirt as matter out of place works, as Dimen explored, to ostensibly protect some of us while sacrificing others. But this framework ultimately hurts us all. It seems to me that the effort to keep this domain of analytic life tidy and clean creates the very circumstances that are conducive to a violation: analysts who experience the vociferous pull of their infantile sexuality may wonder if what they are experiencing may not be an exception, not a manifest of the clinical phenomenon of erotic

countertransference but the real thing. Surely individual factors and vulnerabilities play a role in this (Twemlow and Gabbard, 1995; Celenza, 2007; Gabbard & Peltz, 2001); no analyst would deny that. But the thought that this process gets animated on the level of the group is something only made thinkable to consider because of Dimen's incredibly novel contribution.

Muriel Dimen's contributions to psychoanalysis have been extraordinary both in the daring body of thought she generated and in her commitment to train a younger generation to think, to write, and to question.

Notes on contributor

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