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Dances of agency

The legacy of R.D. Laing: an appraisal of his contemporary relevance, edited by M. Guy Thompson, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015, 180 pp., £26.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1138850156

Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing was both influential and infamous. His critique of conventional psychiatric treatments gained visibility in the 1960s and 1970s, drawing attention to the dehumanizing psychiatric treatment of vulnerable patients and generating an intellectual and cultural polemic reaching far beyond the psychiatric community. *The Politics of Experience* (1967) was a bestseller on American university campuses in the early 1970s. Laing's radical therapeutic communities – where the distinction between patient and therapist was discarded – were the source of both criticism and acclaim. By the 1980s, however, Laing was no longer en vogue. The radical experimentalism of the 1960s and 1970s began to be replaced by a rational reductionism, which continues today. The relationship between psychiatry and Big Pharma rapidly expanded to a $300 billion dollar industry, subduing the voices that critiqued it. What relevance do the ideas of this seminal psychiatrist have for current practitioners and students of psychiatry, psychology and psychotherapy or, indeed, anyone concerned with contemporary approaches to 'mental illness'? Can Laing's understanding of sanity and madness still offer a valid critique for a society where the prevalent therapeutic focus now lies on symptoms, diagnostic categories, pharmaceutical interventions and panacea? *The Legacy of R.D. Laing* attempts this appraisal.

In October 2013, many of Laing's former colleagues, students and friends, and those who like myself craved critical engagement with Laing's work and ideas, convened at Wagner College in New York for a three-day symposium entitled 'What is Sanity? What is Madness?' Twenty-five years since Laing's death, the symposium intended to commemorate his impact on American culture as well as assaying the contemporary relevance of his ideas on sanity and madness. The book is mostly a

collection of the papers presented at Wagner College, written by those who knew him, edited by one of the symposium's organizers, M. Guy Thompson, who had travelled from the USA to London in the 1970s to train with Laing and live in the Portland Road therapeutic community. This volume is not a gushing appraisal of Laing. Many of the chapters are pregnant with the exasperation experienced through knowing him, and reference his paradoxical and perplexing personality. All, however, acknowledge in some way Laing's inspiration and exigency.

The notable absence of female contributors to this volume is disappointing. Despite Laing's oft-spoken-of misogyny, women played a significant role in his life, not only in personal, familial relationships but also within the therapeutic households. While, to be fair, the chapters are written mostly by those who knew Laing (students, friends or colleagues) at a time when psychoanalytic patriarchy was still prevalent, an appraisal of the contemporary relevance of his work needs to occur from a more inclusive representation of both our profession and society at large.

The chapters tend to fall into two main areas: personal accounts, and expositions of Laing's ideas. Inevitably these overlap, as most chapters are informed by both an intellectual resonance and personal interaction with Laing. Peter Mezan reflects on the frustrations and rewards of interviewing Laing over a period of months for his magazine article on Laing published in *Esquire* in 1972. Fritjof Capra's essay recalls a series of invigorating conversations with Laing in 1980 during a conference in Spain entitled 'The Psychotherapy of the Future', exploring the relationship between science and experience. Capra illustrates both the depth of Laing's scientific understanding and the challenge of being under his scrutiny and critique. A life-long friendship subsequently emerged between the two. John Heaton's essay, 'R.D. Laing's Style, Sorcery and Alienation', is deeply informed by his own relationship with Laing, and sheds light on Laing's unique clinical style, where personality, not technique, gave impetus to effective therapy. Laing's scepticism of formal psychotherapy systems, Heaton argues, was way ahead of his time. Reading the chapters informed by personal encounters and conversations with Laing made me nostalgic for experiences that I have not had, in times I didn't live in, where large personalities, philosophy and playfulness seemingly enabled psychotherapy practice to remain on the radical peripheries, at least in part. Perhaps I am romanticizing.

M. Guy Thompson's excellent chapter 'Laing and the Myth of Mental Illness Redux' provides a thorough explanation of Laing's ideas on sanity and madness, expressed in his first book, *The Divided Self*. For those wanting to familiarize themselves with the key ideas that informed Laing throughout his career, this is a clear and provocative introduction. Philosopher Douglas Kirsner takes us deeper into the existential and Marxist philosophy which inspired Laing's thinking on freedom, violence and alienation, critiquing both *The Divided Self* and *The Politics of Experience*. Similar to Heaton's discussion on Laing's trail-blazing style, in his contribution, 'R.D. Laing: Premature Postmodern Psychoanalyst', Martin A. Schulman argues that Laing's ideas and work foreshadowed the relational psychoanalytic movement in the United States, despite the lack of acknowledgement and credit. Steven Gans, a student and peer of Laing, relies on personal conversations, private seminars and access to Laing's unpublished work, *The Challenge of Love*, to propose that Laing's phenomenological approach was rooted in an awakening to love, stifled by double binds of, for example, jealousy, infidelity, lies and solipsism. Gans makes frustratingly brief references to the relationship between Laingian and Levinasian thought in terms

of their shared biblical influences and understanding of the sanctity of the otherness of the other – a rich area for further enquiry.

The stand-out contribution, however, comes with Andrew Pickering's chapter, 'Laing beyond Words: Antipsychiatry as Performance'. Pickering argues that the contemporary relevance of Laing lies not with an appraisal of his ideas but in the performative aspect of his work. By performative, he means 'something very simple … namely, action, behavior and doing things in the world' (p. 59). As Pickering writes, Laing himself wrote very little about his interactions with the mad; it is through Joseph Berke's and Mary Barnes' collaborative effort that we are offered insights into life at Kingsley Hall. Pickering refers to these interactions as 'dances of agency' (p. 60), unpredictable sites of situatedness and emergence. For him, anti-psychiatry, in contrast to the normative, post-enlightenment emphasis upon the value of ideas, 'dwelled in the shadowy zone of action' (ibid.). While the method of psychoanalysis was the talking cure, the method of psychiatry diagnosis and prescription, the method of anti-psychiatry lay in its performance. In the anti-psychiatry of the 1960s and 1970s, the patients' own performances were integral in keeping the dances of agency extant, moving beyond words but constantly in motion. Thompson's second chapter, informed by his personal experience of living in Portland Road and describing the interactions between one particularly challenging resident, Jerome, and the rest of the household, perhaps sheds some light on how dances of agency played out within the therapeutic communities. Kirk Schneider's brief but insightful chapter offers a helpful contextualization to understanding the performative Laing. Pickering ends with an evocative and rousing invitation to us all to perform, to dance our way towards a social revolution, which changes not just psychiatry but the world at large.

Unencumbered, perhaps, by a personal relationship to Laing, Pickering is the only contributor to significantly delve into a contemporary appraisal of Laing's work; the other contributions lie more within remembrance and legacy. I would have particularly welcomed chapters assessing Laing's contribution to family therapy and his legacy within therapeutic communities today. This lack does not diminish the importance of this book, however. For we can only revisit Laing's contribution from the vantage point of our current times, and this book provides an excellent, eclectic collection of papers from which to allow our own responses to emerge, informing our own contemporary appraisal and its relationship to twenty-first-century psychotherapy practice.

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When things fall apart

Being mortal: medicine and what matters in the end, by Atul Gawande, London, Profile, 2015, 304 pp., £6.29 (paperback), ISBN 978-1846685828

With his latest book, *Being Mortal*, Atul Gawande has outdone his previous publications. This insightful, wise and passionate book demands that we abandon our