

# Psychohistory News

Newsletter of the International Psychohistorical Association

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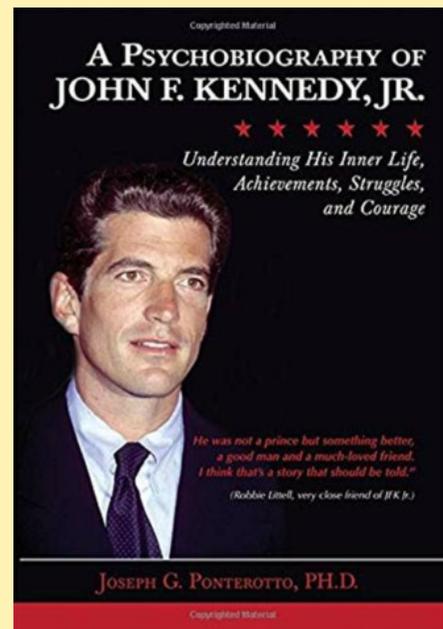
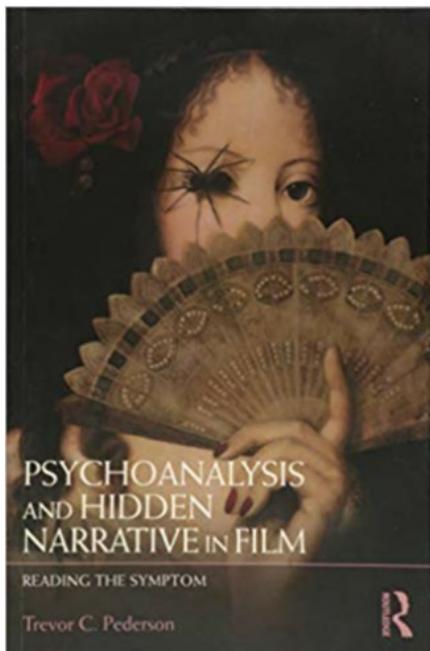
## Psychohistorian Interviews

by Ken Fuchsman

### Trevor C. Pederson

*Psychohistory News* interviews the author on his second book, *Psychoanalysis and Hidden Narrative in Film: Reading the Symptom*, published by Routledge in October.

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### Joseph G. Ponterotto

*A Psychobiography of John F. Kennedy, Jr.: Understanding His Inner Life, Achievements, Struggles, and Courage* was published last November. An interview with the author follows.

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**PSYCHOHISTORY BULLETIN BOARD, PAGE 8**

**HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMILIATION STUDIES,  
2018 CONFERENCE REPORT, PAGE 2**

## Conference Report

# Dignity, Leadership, and the Ecological Crisis

by Brian D'Agostino, Ph.D.

The 32nd biannual conference of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS) network occurred at Columbia University Teachers College on December 6th and 7th, 2018. Like previous HumanDHS events, this was less a traditional academic conference and more a workshop in multi-cultural relationship and community building. This report only scratches the surface of the conference and focuses on two of the presentations.

HumanDHS was cofounded in 2001 by transdisciplinary scholars Evelin Lindner and Linda Hartling. Lindner, who holds doctorates in medicine and psychology, is the author of five books, most recently *Honor, Humiliation, and Terror: An Explosive Mix—And How We Can Defuse It with Dignity* (Dignity Press, 2017). Hartling, a psychologist and former Associate Director of Wellesley College's Jean Baker Miller Training Institute, created the Humiliation Inventory, a self-report scale for assessing the internal experience of humiliation.

The first presentation reviewed here was "The Language of Leading with Dignity," by Richard Slaven, Ph.D. A nuclear engineer by training, Slaven made his career in public school teaching and administration, then as Administrator for the Brandeis University School of Physics. His theme was that effective leaders in all fields are not people who elevate themselves, but who educate and

empower those around them. He illustrated the transformative power of relationships with a moving story about his own lifelong struggle with ADHD. Rick described the cumulative negative and positive impacts of encounters with teachers during his adolescence and felt his life was on a trajectory of failure when he graduated from high school. At this critical time, a single teacher's expression of love and recognition of him as an individual had a powerful impact on Slaven and turned the tide in his inner struggle. This story and his presentation as a whole illustrates the primacy that HDHS places on emotional intelligence and relationships in diagnosing what is wrong with the world and charting a way forward.

Psychologist Michael Britton, Ed.D., gave the Don Klein Memorial Lecture. His topic this year was the ecological crisis in the 21st Century. He discussed the 2018 report *Global Warming of 1.5 C* by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the inadequacy of mainstream responses to this scientific consensus. Global warming of 1.5 C above pre-industrial average temperature is expected to greatly exacerbate the unusually severe wildfires, droughts, precipitation and storms the world has encountered in recent years. Such temperature rise threatens to flood 80% of the world's major cities. And yet the 2016 Paris Agreement (from which the Trump Administration is withdrawing), even with supplements, will not suffice to maintain the 1.5 C cap.

Alexandria Ocasio Cortez's proposed Green New Deal, America's most ambitious ecological proposal, would allocate two trillion dollars over ten years to building green infrastructure, while the scale of investment actually required to avert ecological threat is more on the scale of 2.4 trillion dollars *per year*, more than ten times as much. Britton did not pretend to have easy answers to this looming crisis. He suggested that the solution, if there is going to be one, will come from a grass roots response of billions of people, not from political and corporate leaders invested in the existing system. He suggested that each individual in attendance could begin by tapping experiences of our love of nature and come to terms with the profound feelings of loss that accompany an awareness of the ecological devastation that is occurring. He suggested that the principle of love is going to be paramount as we navigate the mass suffering that the 21st Century will bring.

***Brian D'Agostino, Ph.D. is an educator, researcher, and the Editor of Psychohistory News. He is the author of numerous publications on political psychology and public affairs including The Middle Class Fights Back: How Progressive Movements Can Restore Democracy in America. Visit his website at [bdagostino.com](http://bdagostino.com)***

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### PONTEROTTO ON JOHN F. KENNEDY, JR.

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*In the following, Kenneth A. Fuchsman (KAF) interviews Joseph G. Ponterotto (JGP).*

**KAF:** What makes John F. Kennedy Jr. a subject of significant historical, biographical, and psychological interest?

**JGP:** As the only surviving son of President John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, JFK Jr. was a person of high public interest. His father was taken down by an assassin's bullet in 1963 and his father-figure uncle, Bobby Kennedy was assassinated less than five years later. How does a young child cope with such losses? How does one develop his own personal and career identity in the shadow of a beloved, martyred father and uncle? These are questions of interest to both biographers and psychologists.

JFK Jr. also earned biographers' and historians' attention by the strength of his personality. After

working as an Assistant District Attorney (DA) for four years with the Manhattan DA's office, he left law to co-found and edit *George*, a cutting-edge magazine at the intersection of politics, media, and entertainment.

As an internationally visible and recognizable figure, how would he forge a life? Psychobiographers often focus on unanswered questions in the life of historic figures, and these are some of the mysteries I worked to unravel in this book.

**KAF:** You are a psychobiographer. What is psychobiography? How is it similar to and different from biography, and psychohistory?

**JGP:** I have defined psychobiography as "the intensive life-span study of an individual of historic significance in socio-cultural context using psychological and historiographic research methods and interpreted from established theories of psychology." Biography and psychobiography have many characteristics in common: both rely on rigorous biographical and historiographic research; both interpret the lives of their subjects in the context of the historic period

in which the subjects lived, and both strive to provide objective and balanced profiles of their subjects. Psychobiography, however, is anchored in psychological theory and a focus on the underlying drives, motivations, and inner thoughts and feelings that led to the subject's lived life.

**KAF:** Your particular psychobiographical approach includes specific psychological theories ranging from Erikson to positive psychology. What are the advantages to your approach?

**JGP:** In the first three decades of the 20th century, psychoanalytic theory anchored a majority of psychobiographies. At mid-century, the theoretical horizons of the field began to expand in large part due to studies of individual life at Harvard University by Erik Erikson, Henry Murray, and Gordon Allport, who employed new concepts and methodologies. Psychobiographers also began to recognize that human life is too complicated and complex to understand from one theoretical lens.

In my study of JFK Jr., I integrated theories in the

psychodynamic tradition (Winnicott) and lifespan development (Erikson, Levinson, and Arnett). Many historic figures have been examined from a deficit or pathological model; I wanted to also study JFK Jr.'s life from a strengths-based model, which is the recent emphasis in positive psychology.

**KAF:** In embarking on a research project, an investigator needs to ascertain what evidence is pertinent. How did you do that?

**JGP:** What material is most relevant in the study of a historical figure is a critical question. With JFK Jr., I had a series of questions about his inner life and life history. My initial set of questions about the life of JFK Jr. led me to read various biographies of JFK Jr., as well as memoirs written by his close friends, and his two long-term nannies. First person documents, such as John's letters, poems, and recorded interviews were of primary importance. Conducting face-to-face or phone/email interviews with individuals who knew John well was invaluable. More distanced, third-person documents such as the complete NTSB report on his tragic flight accident, and the FBI files on kidnap threats against him were secured through the Freedom of Information Act, and provided additional valuable information. As I reviewed the material, I attempted to triangulate the data across sources. Different hypotheses about the subject are tested and examined for both confirming and disconfirming evidence.

Over time, I was able to home in, with a high degree of confidence, and answer many of the questions posited.

**KAF:** After his biological father was assassinated, his chief parent was Jackie. How did she encourage, shape, and limit John's personal and career development?

**JGP:** After President Kennedy's assassination, Jacqueline Kennedy soon relocated to New York City. Bobby Kennedy took on a father-like role. When Bobby was assassinated, Jackie and her children were retraumatized. In many ways, Jackie was both a mother and father-figure to John after Bobby's death. Mothering John was a challenge; where Caroline was well-behaved, John was distractible, rambunctious, and mischievous. Jackie kept close tabs on John; she was also concerned for John given some of the challenges his male cousins had faced with substance use and the law. John's lifelong friend Billy Noonan said it well: "Jackie's mothering of John was complex. She had an innate sense, I understood much later, of how to walk the line between protecting him and giving him the freedom to figure out his own way." She became "both a nurturing mother and a strict father to him."

**KAF:** The Kennedy clan and John Jr. were subject to over-the-top media attention. While still a young man, John Jr. was selected as the sexiest man alive. How did the constant attention impact on his ability to have an actual private life?

**JGP:** John F. Kennedy, Jr. may have been the first person born instantaneously famous. Given his famous family and the growing popularity of television in the early 1960s, John grew up in the public eye. This fame posed challenges to his private life. As a child, with the wisdom and mentoring of his mother, his uncles Bobby and Teddy Kennedy, his older sister and cousins, John learned how to navigate the obstacle course of fame early in life. This was not the case for his adult romantic partners. His wife Carolyn Bessette Kennedy struggled with the constant paparazzi attention, and this was a source of stress also for John and their marriage, as John could do only so much to protect her. In time, if the couple had not perished in that fatal last flight, Carolyn may have learned how to cope and navigate the fame; however, she never got that chance.

**KAF:** His mother died when he was 33. In a family with generations of early deaths, what psychological effects did Jackie's death have on her only son?

**JGP:** While likely heartbreaking for John (and Caroline), he shared later with friends that he was ready for his mother's death; he had time to prepare for it, and she had lived a full life. Certainly, Jackie's death also had a liberating impact on his psyche. Now he truly was independent, a full adult. John delayed piloting while Jackie was still living given her expressed fear of his flying in light of the history of plane deaths/accidents in the Kennedy extended family. Also, he was

free to pursue his own career goals and date and marry anyone he wished, whereas when his mother was still alive, she did influence his intimate relationships and career choices.

**KAF:** John Jr. practiced the legal profession, then left and started and edited *George* magazine. What made this publication distinctive? How did it show that John was establishing his own identity? Over time how did the magazine fare?

**JGP:** Many of John's closest friends noted that he never liked the work of an attorney, the ins and outs of legal briefs. A year after his mother's death in 1994, John ventured out on his own, starting *George* magazine with friend and partner Michael Berman. The magazine was a creative idea, focusing on the intersection of politics and entertainment. John hoped the magazine with its "Hollywood" connection would attract a mass audience to the political world. He was correct, and with his preeminence as co-founder and Executive Editor, the magazine did well its first few years.

Over time, *George* began to "go under" around the time of John's death. Some in the industry believe that ultimately, the public was not that interested in mixing politics and entertainment; others believe John's falling out with Michael Berman, and the latter's departure from the magazine, had a detrimental effect. Around this period, digital media and online magazines were growing in popularity and people were

simply buying fewer traditional books, magazines, and newspapers.

**KAF:** You discuss that John regularly took on risky challenges. It was risking piloting an airplane that he was not sufficiently trained to fly that resulted in his 1999 death and that of his wife and sister-in-law. How do you account for his being drawn to such dangerous challenges?

**JGP:** Throughout his life, John in a way was caged in: by his secret service detail; by his need to be cautious given threats to his life (the FBI investigated threats of kidnapping in the mid-1980s and 1990s); by the constant swarm of media and paparazzi. Where could he really be free and safe from swarming photographers? The draw of scuba diving in deep waters, or being dropped by helicopter atop a snow-fresh mountain to ski down, or kayaking where others are hesitant to wander, and of course, by flying high in the air far away from cameras or reporters' questions.

**KAF:** You cite Monica McGoldrick. In 1995, she discussed generations of Kennedy loss and male risky behavior in relation to loss, and asks what "leads a family into such reckless and self-destructive behavior?" Do you think John Jr. followed in the reckless tradition of so many Kennedy men? If so, was it his response to loss or for other reasons? If not, how so?

**JGP:** Perhaps there is some genetic predisposition for the need for constant motion, newness, and other seeds of physical adventure and risk. John was clearly his own

man and quite different from his grandfather Joseph P. Kennedy and father in terms of his responsibility and loyalty in marriage. There may also be generational effects of John's fidelity in marriage. I do not see John as reckless or self-destructive. He was a responsible son, brother, cousin, friend, husband, and chief executive of a major magazine. Yet, at times he exercised poor judgment, particularly in areas of speed and physical adventure. Certainly, there were many losses in the extended Kennedy family. Psychodynamically, intense loss and grief can lead a survivor to engage risk as an affirmation of one's aliveness. Another interpretation, however, should also be considered: John knew life was precious and not guaranteed, and perhaps he tried to swallow too much of life too quickly.

*Joseph Ponterotto is Professor of Counseling Psychology at Fordham University's Graduate School of Education. He is a recognized expert in psychobiography. Dr. Ponterotto has also written *A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer* and is on the Editorial Board of *American Psychologist*. He can be reached at [ponterotto@fordham.edu](mailto:ponterotto@fordham.edu)*

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## PEDERSON ON PSYCHO-ANALYSIS AND FILM

*continued from page one*

*In the following, Kenneth A. Fuchsman (KAF) interviews Trevor C. Pederson (TCP).*

**KAF:** What are the main aims and themes of your recently published *Psychoanalysis and Hidden Narrative in Film: Reading the Symptom*?

**TCP:** The main theme of the book is to clarify structures of the mind. Freud's foundational theories animate my work and, to me, are the most sophisticated and nuanced concepts of the mind thus far in psychology. For example, I show that the superego is synonymous with self-observation or taking the self as an object. I show that this happens across various levels of development and that this corresponds with different levels of authority. I show that it corresponds to both moral states (guilt and shame) but also references the motivational drives that make up the ego so that it's not just self judgements of inferiority but also self-criticisms of being ugly, being weird, being presumptuous, and much more.

The main aim of the book is to give a new psychoanalytic methodology for film interpretation that doesn't just label something on the surface, but constructs an insight into both the characters and the plot. Another aim is to introduce new psychoanalytic techniques for working with patients. Another aim is to continue my project of showing the centrality of the Oedipus complex in psychoanalytic thought. I have a background in

philosophy and an inner need to be systematic in my thinking. However, I hope my readers see that this doesn't come from a dogmatic, rigid place, but from a place of genuine curiosity to understand the person or film that I engage with.

**KAF:** What will psychoanalysts gain from reading a book of film criticism? In other words, can using a case study of the 1987 movie *The Lost Boys* assist psychoanalysts in their therapeutic endeavors, and if so, how?

**TCP:** Readers will get chapters on psychoanalytic theory with clinical vignettes to showcase the concepts. However, by having a cultural object like a film, they will also have something that will train their empathy for seeing various inter-psychic complexes and group relations in both patients and people off of the couch. *The Lost Boys* contains a classic oedipal triangle, and to show the versatility of this concept across different levels of superego development should be helpful for clinicians to similarly assess their patients.

**KAF:** How do you use the unusual clientele you have treated to understand this particular film?

**TCP:** Working with criminal and addict populations made me very aware of how different the world feels for the regressed person in comparison with people functioning at higher levels of development. It also made me aware of how pervasive repetitions are. It is shocking when you work with a person who has been physically abused by four different romantic partners, or who has been cheated on in all of his significant

relationships. People who have more functioning parts of their personality don't show the same insistent repetition, but instead will have several competing repetitions that want to emerge in their lives.

**KAF:** How will lovers of movies and those interested in film criticism gain from reading psychoanalytic film criticism? How do psychoanalytic perspectives advance the well-developed field of film analysis?

**TCP:** They will gain insight into troubling or idiosyncratic parts of the film. They will gain a whole new plot that they can construct out of their favorite movies to reveal the hidden neurotic story. They will gain a reading of the film that is thorough, intricate, and works with the plot of the film instead of breaking the analysis up into a character study or reading the film symbolically as a comment on colonialism, queer theory, or something else.

**KAF:** What is it in *The Lost Boys* that makes it a worthy subject of analysis?

**TCP:** First, it was the film from which I derived the symptom reading. I was a live-in counselor at a house where people with severe mental illness lived in Boston. I would do a movie night on Saturdays and was forced to sit through many terrible movies. To pass the time, I turned my analytical eye to the films to see if there was something going on in them that was more interesting. At some point *The Lost Boys* came up in the queue and it was when everything fell together for me. I should say that I actually like *The*

*Lost Boys*. It's one of those 80s movies that has heart, even though it includes many of the excesses of that decade. I also thought it was important to begin with a popular film in which there'd be no question of the film makers having read psychoanalytic theory and consciously putting it into the film.

**KAF:** Psychoanalysis is a field that has moved in a variety of different directions. You have distinct views on what is most central in psychoanalysis that you explicated in *The Economics of Libido: Psychic Bisexuality, the Superego, and the Centrality of the Oedipus Complex*. How do you place your work in the spectrum of psychoanalytic viewpoints?

**TCP:** If I think about how others might see my work, I could see them calling me a revisionist Freudian. However, if someone reads the book, he will see that I extensively quote Freud in contrast to popular readings of him that cherry pick in order to make him into a straw man or to make his concepts overly simplistic. In regards to other theoretical allegiances, I see Klein as Freud's real daughter and agree with how she showed the extensions of his ideas into early development. I first got my sense for the importance of the Oedipus complex from Chasseguet-Smirgel and that was the link I needed to begin to approach the understanding of characterology in a new way. I also quote Kohut, some ego psychologists, and some contemporary theorists like Mike Eigen and Susan Kaveler-Adler.

I know that some people are instantly dismissive when they see

my engagement with structural theory, and I have been criticized for writing about psychoanalysis like it's the 1980s. However, a lot of what is called psychoanalysis today bears little resemblance to it. They stripped the corpse of any identifying materials and seek to reanimate it with appeals to academic ideas or borrowing from other disciplines. They criticize Freud's model of mind and often just rename the original psychoanalytic concepts in their own jargon.

**KAF:** What are the advantages for psychoanalysis of your ideas? What do your theories offer psychoanalysis that is not sufficiently emphasized these days?

**TCP:** My theories offer a system for evaluating differences in people and the corresponding clinical techniques show the precision in isolating these patterns and resolving them. I also think I show how powerful intrapsychic issues are in patients and how contemporary approaches that have lost touch with the intrapsychic are unable to work with many types of psychopathology.

**KAF:** It is my understanding that your publisher, Routledge, is considering publishing two other books of film criticism by you. What will be the subject matter of these other volumes?

**TCP:** The next book will provide a reading of *The Piano* (1993) and I will focus on the Electra complex in the film. To be more accurate, there is an Electra complex, but the inter-relations that the symptom reading isolates revolve around causing desire and causing love that are part of a narcissistic feminine motivational system. Along with

getting into the different motivational systems of the economics of libido, I will introduce the economics of moros (doom). Essentially, this is the idea that individuals can libidinize anxiety situations which amounts to self sabotage, and I compare and contrast it with Lacan's concept of jouissance. The other film in the original manuscript was 2010's *Killers*. It is a truly awful film, but there is a lot going on in its symptom reading. In this book, I will revise the four level object relations theory in Freud and expand it into a couple of more stages and place the emphasis more upon the passive pole of the personality. The first two books are about the active pole and their complexes (Oedipus and Electra). The Bellerophon complex will likely be the subject of the third, with the Antigone complex to follow in the fourth book.

**KAF:** Thanks, Trevor.

**Trevor Pederson, MA, LPC, is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and author of the 2016 Gradiva Award winning book *The Economics of Libido: Psychic Bisexuality, the Superego, and the Centrality of the Oedipus Complex*. He can be reached at [trevor.pederson@gmail.com](mailto:trevor.pederson@gmail.com)**

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## PSYCHOHISTORY BULLETIN BOARD

On March 23, 2019, The Object Relations Institute for Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis will hold its annual conference. The subject is "The Therapeutic Action of Working with Erotic Transference." Dr. Susan Kavalier-Adler, PhD., ABPP, D.Litt., NCPsyA is the keynote speaker. The discussants are Stephanie Teitelbaum, LCSW and Dr. Margaret Yard. The moderator is Dr. Eva Papiasvilli. The location is the St. John's University Manhattan campus at 101 Astor Place. For more information, email: [admin@ORINYC.org](mailto:admin@ORINYC.org) or go to <http://www.orinyc.org/Calendar%20of%20ORI%20Events.html>

An additional sub-theme of the International Psychohistorical Association's 42nd Annual conference will be "The Resurgence of Anti-Semitism in the United States and Europe." Presenters include Jonathan Brent, Executive Director of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; Robert Chazan, the S. H. and Helen R. Scheuer Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University; Shuki Cohen, Associate Professor of Psychology at John Jay College; and psychiatrists Arnold Richards and Jamshid Marvasti, psychoanalysts David Lotto and Emily Kuriloff, psychologist Michael Britton, physician Inna Rozentsvit, anthropologist Howard Stein, historian Ken Fuchsman, and religion scholar Constance L. Benson. The dates of the conference are May 22-24, 2019 at New York University. For more information go to [psychohistory.us](http://psychohistory.us) or email [kfuchsman@gmail.com](mailto:kfuchsman@gmail.com).

**Forthcoming Psychohistory Forum Seminars** include **Brian D'Agostino** (IPA) on "Sacred Cows and Scapegoats: Displacement, Ideology, and the Future of Democracy" on March 9 and **Lawrence Friedman** (Harvard) on "Erik Erikson Reconsidered" on April 13, 2019. These meetings are held at Fordham Lincoln Center at Columbus Avenue and 60th Street in Manhattan. *Clio's Psyche's* 2019 call for papers includes: "The Many Roads of the Builders of Psychohistory" (due March 31) and the "Sex and Power in the Era of #MeToo" symposium (due June 15). The Psychology of Trauma Special Issue and articles will be published in the Spring issue along with the James Anderson and Charles Strozier Lincoln Dialogue. For information contact Paul Elovitz at [cliospsycheeditor@gmail.com](mailto:cliospsycheeditor@gmail.com).

**ROOM: A SKETCHBOOK FOR ANALYTIC ACTION** is a revolutionary community action magazine. Through art and psychoanalysis two disciplines devoted to expression of self and unconscious, this new on-line magazine captures the effects that the political has on the psychological and the effects that the psychological has on the political. The next issue, **Room 2.19**, features essays by Bandy X. Lee, Simon Western, Carolyn Ellman, Eugene Mahon, Coline Covinton, Kerry Malawista, Elizabeth Evert, Dana Sinopoli, Brent Matheny, Natasha Kurchanova, Michelle Fine and Yitzi Katz. Subscribe for free at: <http://www.analytic-room.com/subscribe-now/>