

‘You’re the Shrink, not a Person’: America’s Turn to Therapy in A.M. Homes’s *In a Country of Mothers* and Donald Antrim’s *The Verificationist*

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Abstract:

From the beginning of the 20th century, Freudian psychoanalysis dominated the American cultural landscape, bridging the divide between the therapeutic field as a niche and popular culture. However, the popularity of psychoanalysis decayed in the second half of the 20th century, as it was progressively overcome by a broader vision of psychotherapy. Following the turn to therapy, the American therapeutic field has come to encompass various models of therapy beyond psychoanalysis: therapy is nowadays an integral part of American life, shown by its overarching depiction in mainstream media and the high number of different self-help groups and books. Nonetheless, the adaptation of the American turn to therapy into fiction has not been widely examined in the literature. Accordingly, in this paper I argue that Donald Antrim’s *The Verificationist* (2000) and A.M. Homes’s *In a Country of Mothers* (1993) provide a depiction of, respectively, the decline of classical psychoanalysis, and the rise of newer therapeutic approaches absorbed into American culture. This paper will compare these two novels in order to evaluate how Antrim and Homes illustrate and reflect on America’s cultural turn to therapy. After a broad evaluation on how the therapeutic is introduced in the two narratives, I will explore the texts’ treatments of conceptual and neurological advancements within psychotherapy. Lastly, I will examine how the texts comment on the spatial relation between therapist, therapee and therapy itself. Through these interconnected analyses, I will conclude that Antrim and Homes offer two radically different fictional representations of the evolution of the American therapeutic landscape.

‘I am marked like a road map from head to toe with my repressions. You can travel the length and breadth of my body over superhighways of shame and inhibition and fear’.

—Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*

From the beginning of the 20th century, Freudian psychoanalysis dominated the American cultural landscape, bridging the divide between ‘popular and high culture’ (Illouz 23). However, the popularity of psychoanalysis decayed in the second half of the 20th century (Engel 7), as it was progressively overcome by a broader vision of psychotherapy. Following the turn to therapy, the American therapeutic field has come to encompass various models of therapy beyond psychoanalysis: therapy is nowadays an integral part of American life, shown by its overarching depiction in mainstream media and the high number of different self-help tools and movements (Aubry and Travis 15).

Nonetheless, the adaptation of the American turn to therapy into fiction has not been widely examined in the literature. I argue that Donald Antrim’s *The Verificationist* (2000) and A.M. Homes’s *In a Country of Mothers* (1993) (*In a Country*) provide commentary, respectively, on the decline of classical psychoanalysis, and on the rise of newer therapeutic approaches absorbed into American culture. *The Verificationist* paints a picture of Freudian psychoanalysis in contemporary America: Antrim creates a microcosm which is essentially, as Homes’s Claire Roth would point out, ‘[a] regular shrink convention’ (Homes 154). Examining it from within, *The Verificationist* documents why psychoanalysis has faded as practice in contemporary American culture. By contrast, in *In a Country*, Homes introduces a ‘capable, established psychotherapist’ (Homes), Claire Roth, along with a vision of the therapeutic that reflects the evolution of psychotherapy into American culture: it is not connected to any specific school of thought, also assessing the broader practice through the eyes of a therapist, Judy. This paper will compare the two texts to evaluate how Antrim and Homes illustrate America’s cultural turn to therapy. After generally considering how the therapeutic is depicted in the two narratives, I will explore the texts’ treatments of conceptual and neurological advancements within psychotherapy. Lastly, I will analyse how the texts comment on the spatial relation between therapist, therapist and therapy itself, to conclude that Antrim and Homes provide two different fictional perspectives of the American turn to therapy.

Within *In a Country*, Homes depicts the popularisation of the therapeutic into American culture, tracing the evolution of therapy from the 1960s beyond the sole psychoanalytic practice. Homes sets her novel in the early 1990s, when therapy as a broader field had replaced classical Freudian psychoanalysis: psychologists and ‘regular’ therapists focused on newer approaches to therapy – such as cognitive behaviour therapies and client-centred therapy (Engel 122). Indeed, Homes overtly makes fun of outdated Freudian psychoanalysis, depicting a caricatured male therapist with ‘a beard, wire-rimmed glasses, and a hooked nose’, who had a ‘cold, dark, and small’ office with a sofa ‘that smelled moist’ (255). The psychoanalyst reduces Jody’s worries to ‘the peculiar and sometimes perverse ways in which women relate’ (256), implying that Jody and Claire’s relationship is somewhat sexual. This is a stark juxtaposition with Claire’s way of conducting therapy, as a psychologist immersed in a culture where therapy is embedded, and wherein she can employ the instruments she has to create her own approaches: ‘Mother, Child, Oedipus, Freud. The dream didn’t belong to an old dead shrink, to any particular theory; it was her own’ (156).

In fact, Claire’s therapees’ response to her, ‘[t]his was also the part of Claire that her patients thought made her a great therapist: she was a real person’ (58), recalls the work of American psychotherapist Carl Rogers, active throughout the years in which therapy was finding its way into the popular. Roger’s client-centred therapy focused on practising ‘empathy, understanding and acceptance’ (Engel 76). Accordingly, as her therapees say of her, ‘[n]ot only did Claire understand; she appreciated, she approved’ (Homes 20), Claire seems to have adapted her methods to a contemporary vision of therapy. Following the modernisation of the field, therapy is integrated within *In a Country*’s American culture, as Claire’s attitude towards therapy denotes a sharp attention to the progressive changes in the American therapeutic landscape.

Although in 1966 Philip Rieff noted that Freudian psychoanalysis ‘had already receded into history’ (21), American psychoanalyst Leo Rangell wrote in 1988 that contemporary psychoanalysis consisted of a combination of various post-Freudian theories (316). At first glance, it might appear as if *The Verificationist*’s conception of the therapeutic matches Rangell’s. Throughout the text, set in an unspecified year during the American turn to therapy, Antrim references post-Freudian psychoanalysis, as Tom refers to self and object-relations theories: ‘This idea will be recognized [...] as a militant extension of Object Relations Theory in psychoanalysis’ (16), and calls his colleague Manuel ‘the Kleinian’ (46,

69, 117). As the reader perceives the evolution of psychoanalysis into American therapeutic culture, Antrim seems to be following Homes in analysing the turn from classical psychoanalysis towards a broader understanding of psychotherapy. However, just like psychoanalysis is a ‘world unto itself, replete with its own internal logic’ (Engel 27), so is the Pancake House the night of Tom’s hallucination, and that logic is essentially Freudian. Tom and his colleagues cannot overcome Freudianism: they are concerned with sexual hysteria (Antrim 40, 42) and ‘extraordinary superego functioning’ (109), and Antrim alludes to Freud’s works such as *Totem and Taboo* (43) and *Eros and Thanatos* (45). Although Tom addresses his community as ‘disconsolate post-Freudians’ (127), Antrim’s professionals keep emphasising ‘the infant gaze in a non-mother/child setting’ (123) and ‘repressed feelings [...] neurotic depressions’ (152). As *The Verificationist*’s narration progresses, there is no representation of the efforts to ‘confirm, revise and extend’ (Hopkins) Freudian theories that post-Freudian psychoanalysis displays. In fact, though it was traditional psychoanalysis that paved the way for contemporary talk therapies to become established disciplines (Pigman 299), *The Verificationist*’s contemporary psychologists keep relying on the father of psychoanalysis as their main point of reference.

Moreover, the novels provide representations of theoretical and neurological advancements - or a lack thereof - within the therapeutic field. By the 1990s, psychotherapy was paying greater attention to biological and neurological aspects of mental health and illnesses. Neurobiologists had started to analyse, for instance, how the brain emitted different types of brainwaves and varied its electrical activity depending on the mental state experienced by the subject. This allowed psychiatrists to pinpoint in which sections of the brain anxiety, panic, and fear resided (Engel 214–15). As a result of these findings, the broader existing category of therapists also had access to discoveries regarding therapeutic treatments. Accordingly, Homes portrays the therapist’s implementations of newer neurobiological findings:

It was Claire’s opinion that anxiety attacks were like allergy reactions. [...] Situations exposing the patient to death and/or loss [...] caused an overwhelming flood of response, a chemical pinball racing through the body, bouncing off nerve receptors, the repetitious, ricocheting ding-dinging driving the score higher and higher. Pulse rises, palms sweat, pupils become hypersensitive to light, breathing becomes shallow and rapid. (Homes 55)

Although not a medical doctor or psychiatrist, Claire addresses and studies the relationship between mental illnesses and the brain's chemical reactions, as she makes the link between anxiety attacks and allergy reactions herself and deems this 'her opinion'. Furthermore, she describes the connection between brain states and physical symptoms in lay language. Homes's pinball metaphor itself presents a kind of anxiety, escalating from the coupling of brain states and the metaphorical side of anxiety attacks, to actual physical symptoms. By juxtaposing this pop-cultural pinball metaphor with diagnostically described physical reactions and mentions of 'nerve receptors', Homes provides an insight into the newer inner workings of American therapy, overturning Freud's Cartesian-derived 'efforts to distinguish psychological and bodily complaints' (Aubry and Travis 15). As Homes presents a conceptually and linguistically accessible explanation of the advancements of therapy, *In a Country* makes tangible how contemporary psychotherapy has come to encompass new neurological discoveries.

On the other hand, the link between mental illnesses and physical symptoms is mentioned in passing throughout *The Verificationist*. Tom acknowledges the inaccuracy of treating mental and physical symptoms as distinct: '[i]t is incorrect to say that the psychosomatically ill person fantasizes symptoms' (Antrim 96), illustrating the example of the hypochondriac. Still, actual advancements within therapy are not taken into consideration. The Krakower Institute's therapists obsess with the manifestations of hysteria and neurotic behaviour, as different characters muse, "'We live in times of great hysteria. Death will save us'" (45), and 'I was, I felt, in danger of a psychoneurotic splitting off' (34). The terms 'hysteria' and 'neurosis' were officially declared out of use in 1980 due to the concepts' neurological and psychiatric inaccuracy¹ (APA 1980 9, 377). Actually, Tom's own latching onto the anachronistic psychoanalytic process produces a return to the beginning of the issues themselves. Tom theorises that his problems stem from him perpetually living in a state of not fully realised infancy: 'The problem is that I don't know how to be a man. [...] Is it because I want to *be* the child? I want to be the child! I want to be the child!' (Antrim 105). Tackling the staple concept of Freudian psychoanalysis, Antrim creates the illusion that Tom's anxieties will be resolved once their source is uncovered. In fact, newer therapeutic

¹ See 'Introduction' to the Third Edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1980) for a full account of the Manual's omission of the concept of 'psychoneurosis' and its subtypes.

approaches have proved that merely exposing the source of the therapee's issues, as Freud's psychoanalysis would, is not sufficient (Engel 90). To eradicate the distress, the therapist needs to instruct the therapee on how to constructively think about it (90). As Tom comes to an end of his dreamlike journey, and we see him crying as his colleague Bernhardt rocks him in his arms (Antrim 176), it becomes apparent that the identification of Tom's malaise stemming out of a never-ending state of childhood will not lead to resolution, neither psychological nor narrative. Antrim extends his protagonist's Oedipus complex to a point of non-return, as Tom himself recounts, 'I was [Bernhardt's] tiny baby. With my hand in Rebecca's, and with my father's cock beside me, I was being born' (Antrim 163). Thus, despite having been defined as a surreal coming-of-age story (Saunders viii), *The Verificationist* demonstrates how the theoretical concepts and methods of psychoanalysis do not prove adequate anymore.

Discussions on the therapists' disentanglement of their therapees' anxieties open a question on the spatial relation between therapist, patient and therapy itself. Homes makes clear that, from the therapee's perspective, outside and inside cannot be more firmly delineated, as Jody affirms, '[y]ou didn't have to live with your words for more than fifty minutes. That was the beauty of therapy, you always ran out of time' (67). However, this definitely does not hold for the therapist, as Claire 'worried that she was inadvertently intimidating her patients into containing their problems between sessions: you are alone, the nightmare is true, no one will help you until next Tuesday at three' (170). Claire merges the divide between the outside and inside of therapy, giving her therapees her home number to ensure that they know they can always count on her support (221). Claire's approach follows the tendency of newer psychotherapeutic procedures to establish a symmetry between therapist and therapee, replacing the 'dogmatic tone' of traditional psychoanalysis (Engel 22) with the practice resembling a couple of friends having a relaxed conversation (76). Indeed, Claire conducts her sessions as dialogues, a form of communication which indicates 'a greater willingness to accept the possibility of making mistakes' (Pigman 307). This is for instance shown through Claire's exchanges with her middle-aged therapee Bea, concerning the woman's private life: "Plenty of places use volunteers—Lincoln Center, [...]". "I don't want to make a commitment. What if [my husband] wants to go away for a few days?" "Then you tell them you'll be away [...]. It's not a problem if you have to leave" (Homes 59). Claire's approach paired with her conviction that the 'therapist was supposed to be the authority figure, the good mother, the perfect listener, the best kind of friend' (Homes 119–

120), embodies the belief that therapy should be a mix of ‘attentive listening and selective comment’ (Coetzee and Kurtz 5) – a method which is indeed most viable through dialogue. Claire’s practice aims to bridge the divide between herself and her therapees, to not only lead them to understand what it is that actually troubles them, but most relevantly to extend the communicative therapeutic process to other aspects of the therapees’ lives.

Claire’s *modus operandi* reflects on the structure of *In a Country*: as its chapters are alternatively focused on Claire and Jody, Homes’s text mirrors the therapist and therapee’s back and forth, the standard communication method in contemporary talk therapy. By contrast, *The Verificationist*’s form does not allow for its main therapist to communicate with any external interlocutor: Antrim’s text is not divided into chapters, its narrative coming across as a single uninterrupted stream. *The Verificationist*’s reader can picture Tom undertaking a traditional psychoanalytic session, with the analyst ‘sitting out of view’ (Engel 19), jotting down notes whilst Tom is lying on the sofa relating his issues: ‘Would a picture of Jane make things more concrete?’ (Antrim 28). *The Verificationist*’s form evades the possibility of Homes’s therapist-patient alternation: as a single ‘you’ pervades the narration, ‘Have you ever noticed?’ (22), ‘Try this sometime if you don’t believe me [...]’ (27), *The Verificationist*’s form mirrors the asymmetrical pace of psychoanalysis. Antrim’s text addresses how ‘the contrived conditions of the analytical situation seek to create a kind of present absence or absent presence. The analysand does not see the analyst’ (Green 282). *The Verificationist*’s structure and its portrayal of Tom being both therapist and therapee demonstrate how the present absence created by classical psychoanalysis reinforces the inability of such at installing an actual communication between therapist and patient. Accordingly, the consideration of whether Tom is therapist or therapee emphasises Green’s standpoint. As he converses with waitress Rebecca, Tom displays the authoritarian psychoanalytical stance, wherein the analyst usually has the last word (Pigman 308): ‘I suggested to her, in calming, professional therapist’s tones [...] suggested less by word choice than by subtle modulations in pitch and volume [...]’ (Antrim 87). Nonetheless, Tom’s ‘interview with himself’ (105), as he then confesses, ‘I’m not certain I should be admitting this’ (143), reiterates Tom’s double bind. Antrim evaluates the imbalance of the psychoanalytic procedure, blurring the spatial boundaries between Tom being the narrative’s therapist or therapee. As the spatial relation between therapist, therapee and practice complicates, *The Verificationist*’s form illustrates psychoanalysis’ absence of an actual communication process.

André Green wrote, '[d]ismantling something can never account for its existence as a whole' (291), and this consideration applies to the practice of psychoanalysis. The legacy of psychoanalysis still endures, although to a limited extent: Americans undertaking therapy today benefit from concepts such as repressed thoughts and the unconscious (Engel 8), and Homes's Claire also mentions 'direct-conscious [...] direct-unconscious experiences' (55). Still, *The Verificationist* and *In a Country of Mothers* offer two radically different portrayals of psychotherapy in the US. Whilst the former presents traditional psychoanalysis aiming for rigid self-knowledge and enlightenment, the latter reconnects to contemporary practices encompassing an 'exchange of a broad range of highly charged feelings' (Kates 3). As such, Antrim and Homes provide literary renditions of the fall of psychoanalysis and the surge of newer forms of psychotherapy, reflecting on why the need was felt for newer approaches to tackle mental health and illnesses within contemporary American culture.

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