Motherless Subjects and Mothered Selves: The Implications of Jacques Lacan’s and Donald Winnicott’s Writings on the Formation of the ‘I’ for American Studies

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ABSTRACT
This article contrasts the theories of ego formation put forward in Jacques Lacan’s ‘The Mirror Stage’ and Donald Winnicott’s ‘The Mirror Role of the Mother,’ and discusses their methodological implications for the field of American studies. While Lacan theorises subjectivity as irreparably split and (self-)alienated, Winnicott offers an optimistic version of a self which is sustained in its going-on-being by a nourishing maternal presence. These disparate conceptualisations of the human being produce two powerful frames through which to approach culture. Yet, while Lacan is widely recognised in the American studies scholarship, Winnicott remains virtually unknown. This article aims to enhance the visibility of the British author by outlining the productivity of his ideas for any cultural or literary analysis. By stressing the foundational significance of the primary bond Winnicott’s theory intervenes in the recent critiques of neoliberal capitalism which remain halted in a Lacanian-like melancholic mode, masked by a cultural command of perpetual enjoyment. The Winnicottian perspective challenges Lacan’s fixation on the unattainable objects of desire, reiterated by the neoliberal myth of self-perfection through consumption, and offers an alternative pattern of human sociality, based on relational, self-reflexive moderation.

Introduction

I write this article from the position of an American studies academic who for several years has been combining various strands of cultural criticism – mostly art theory and affect theory – with motherhood studies. As I was gradually making my way into

[The mirror stage] situates the agency of the ego . . . in a fictional direction.

Jacques Lacan

In individual emotional development the precursor of the mirror is the mother’s face.

Donald Winnicott

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motherhood studies, I was taken aback by the fact that Donald Winnicott, a foundational figure for mother-oriented research, is virtually unknown in the American literary and cultural scholarship. While Jacques Lacan and his feminist responders (Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray) are recognised and quoted by numerous American academics (among them Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, Rosi Braidotti, and Teresa Brennan), Winnicott remains an almost blank spot in the bulk of American studies publications. To this date, the anthologies and textbooks of literary theory and criticism widely used in American studies acknowledge the writings of Lacan – his 1949 article ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’ has become canonical – while disregarding Winnicott. In her book on American postmodern literature, Zuzanna Ladyga (2009) writes that ‘Winnicott’s theory in not widely known among literary critics’ (45) and, for example, Teresa Brennan’s 1993 History after Lacan does not refer to Winnicott at all, even though the book pivots around the cultural expulsion of the mother. The result is that American studies scholars are largely unfamiliar with Winnicott’s ideas, even though his concepts of the maternal specularisation and the transitional space could significantly impact any literary or cultural analysis. On the other hand, when I started searching for comparative publications on Lacan and Winnicott in the psychoanalytical scholarship, I was astonished to discover a similar lacuna, only in reverse. Deborah Anna Luepnitz succinctly states that ‘[y]ears of mutual avoidance by their followers (especially of Lacan by Anglophone clinicians) has arguably diminished understanding of the full spectrum of psychoanalytic thought’ (957). In my own research, I found only one anthology that critically compares the two thinkers, Routledge’s Between Winnicott and Lacan (2002), and three articles: the mentioned above Luepnitz’s ‘Thinking in Space between Winnicott and Lacan’ (2009), Alain Vanier’s ‘Winnicott and Lacan: A Missed Encounter?’ (2012), and a transcript of Joanne Conway’s seminar talk ‘Lacan with D. Winnicott’ (2011), all written from a psychoanalytical perspective. Most authors perceive the two thinkers as largely incompatible (Lupenitz, 960), even though both Lacan and Winnicott describe analogous phenomena and continue to exert a profound influence on psychoanalysis and other branches of the humanities.

I decided then to grapple with what seems like a screaming gap in social studies by trying to systematise the convergences and disparities between Lacan’s and Winnicott’s conceptualisations of the ‘I’ formation to see how the two arrive at two different models of subjectivity/selfhood. While Lacan theorises an inherently motherless subject, which establishes itself in a solipsist relation to its own imago, the Winnicottian mothered self is inherently relational and only made possible thanks to the consistent, empirical maternal presence. These two models of ego-formation produce two different understanding of the human being, which has far-reaching methodological consequences, both for cultural studies and psychoanalytically oriented scholarship. In what follows, I will contrast Lacan’s and Winnicott’s ideas in a hope to encourage a broader conversation between these two fields of study that take the human being as their subject. In the closing section, I discuss the potential of Winnicott’s ideas to challenge and reformulate the currently developing frameworks in American studies, including affect theory and other branches of social studies.
Some remarks on the initial mirrors

This section primarily contrasts Lacan’s ‘The Mirror Stage’ and Winnicott’s ‘The Mirror Role of the Mother,’ focusing on the process of the ‘I’ formation. In their texts, both Lacan and Winnicott use the metaphor of the initial mirror as the child’s prototypical Other, albeit they essentially differ in how they conceptualise it. I begin by stating the very basic fact that both Lacan and Winnicott describe the emergence of the ‘I’ as a process of specularisation; for both the ‘I’ does not predate experience, but comes into being through a relation between the child and its image. Yet, even though both authors emphasise the importance of the gaze, they profoundly differ in the way they theorise the mirror. While for Lacan subjectivity emerges in a narcissistic exchange between the child and its internalised self-image of perfection (the so-called ‘imago’), for Winnicott this emergence is only made possible through an embodied interaction between two living organisms: the child and the good-enough mother. This fundamental difference proves consequential for the entirety of their writings; it shuts Lacan in the alienating pattern of dominance/submission and makes Winnicott seminal not only for the development of motherhood studies, but for the very way in which we may think relationality, selfhood and our basic humanity.

The significance of the type of the initial mirror cannot be overestimated. There is an essential difference between Lacan’s theorising the subject as constituted through a lonely experience of inadequacy in face of an exteriorised image of self-perfection and Winnicott’s assertion that one’s sense of selfhood is created through internalising, as Marianne Hirsch puts it, ‘an interpersonal field of relationship’ (206) with another nourishing human being. The very poetics the two authors employ betrays their disparate alliances: in ‘The Mirror Stage’ Lacan uses the distanciating Althusserian-structuralist term ‘subject’ over ten times to denote the child, unlike Winnicott, who employs the humanising terms ‘infant,’ ‘baby’ or ‘child,’ which he never alternates with ‘subject.’ What is more, Lacan moves within the paternal connotative field (for example, he describes the imago as ‘castrating’ (1948, 85)), while Winnicott engages in organic metaphors, writing for example about ‘growing a self,’ ‘the flowering of the self,’ or a self that can ‘grow, develop and mature to wholeness’ and using terms like ‘health’ and ‘intimacy’ (in Luepnitz, 963, 961). By focusing on the paternal function, Lacan remains an heir to the father-oriented strand of the Freudian tradition, while Winnicott discharges the links with phallogocentrism, almost completely erasing the father (Luepnitz, 976). The difference in alliances is also reflected in the two authors’ therapeutic practice: while Lacan adopted a strict paternal persona, cutting the sessions short at critical moments to exert an individual effort on the part of the patient, Winnicott emphasised the co-creative potential of the patient-analyst pair and sometimes extended the sessions to amplify the results. All these differences echo the two authors’ understanding of the ‘I,’ which is alienated and defensive for Lacan, and relational and trusting for Winnicott.

Not surprisingly, in ‘The Mirror Stage,’ Lacan theorises the child’s confrontation with its initial mirror in terms of trauma (1949, 78). He depicts it as a process in which the child ‘precipitously’ moves ‘from insufficiency to anticipation,’ proceeding in fantasy from ‘a fragmented image of the body to [a] form of its totality’ (78). This process
is accompanied by images of ‘castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, and bursting open of the body,’ which exert aggression in the child (1948, 85–86). This initial trauma, the French psychoanalyst maintains, leads to the child’s ‘finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure’ (1949, 76). Crucially, within this approach, the total form of the child’s body is given to him in exteriority, rather than built from within in a lived relational experience. Such child is thus unable to integrate its body image into its sense of selfhood, which makes it difficult, or even impossible, for the child to pleasurably experience its corporality. At the same time, since the initial mirror is an unattainable image of perfection, the agency of the ego is situated ‘in a fictional direction’ (76), rendering the child irreparably split and geared towards unachievable ideals.

The situation greatly varies in the case of Winnicott. For him, unlike the Lacanian hostile imago which breeds in the subject a sense of essential inadequacy, the primary mirror is a breathing, striving and caring adult companion who makes it possible for the child to develop a coherent psychosomatic self-image from within, through an embodied loving relation. For Winnicott, it is not the imago’s, but the mother’s gaze which is constitutive for the child’s ego formation. And it is through this sustaining gaze that the child can construct its initial sense of wholeness not in exteriority, but from within (1967b, 150–51). Hence, Winnicott’s famous statement that ‘[t]here is no such thing as an infant, whenever one finds an infant one finds maternal care, and without maternal care there would be no infant’ (1960, 587). For Lacan then, in Joanne Conway’s words, it is the ‘very lack of object that founds the subject’s relation to the world,’ while for Winnicott it is the ‘adaptation via the mother.’ This essential foundational difference initiates two disparate models of the ego: the Lacanian (self-)alienated, solitary subject and the Winnicottian relational self.

**Motherless subjects and mothered selves**

The disparate genealogies of the Lacanian subject and the Winnicottian self translate into the two authors’ diverse conceptualisations of the human being. In the 1960s British psychologist, John Bowlby developed attachment theory, positing that ‘attachment behavior [characterizes] human beings from the cradle to the grave’ (1979, 129). Crucially for my purpose, Bowlby maintains that the type of one’s primary bond is foundational for one’s future relational pattern (1988). I then ask: What are the implications of Lacan’s and Winnicott’s initial relational scenarios? Or, to put it in more philosophical terms, what is the long-term significance of one’s prototypical Other? Following Bowlby, I suggest that the reason why the Lacanian subject embarks on a life-long pursuit of unattainable ideal objects (the so-called objects little a) is because the primary attachment is not with an empirically experienced, good-enough human being, but with a projected image of self-perfection. Objects little a are nothing else than epigones of the original, unattainable imago. Winnicott, on the other hand, by maintaining that the child pieces itself together in an empirical relation with a good-enough caregiver, proposes a wholly different understanding of the human being, one that is not fixated on phantasmatic ideals, but engaging in empirical relationships, which are not ideal but good-enough. More specifically, the resultant differences
between these two models can be traced in five areas: the relation between body and language; the link between body, language and the mirror stage; the question of human relationality; the significance of human vulnerability and failure; and the divergent affective dominants of Lacan’s and Winnicott’s bodies of work.

The first difference concerns the relation between body and language. For the paediatrician Winnicott, the acquisition of language is ‘nothing other than another developmental process in the life of the child’ (Conway). This is unlike for Lacan, whose Freud-and-structuralism-informed theory renders language defining for the subject-formation: it is the entry into the Symbolic that seals the child’s subjectivity. Lisa Baraitser notes that nothing can wriggle the Lacanian subject from the field of the Symbolic, because ‘what is produced … is more speech’ (2011, 59). For Lacan, the child’s entrance into the Symbolic continues the trauma of the mirror stage, as it solidifies its irreparable lack, producing a split between ideas and the non-linguistic existential excess. Within this frame, the body is constructed symbolically (it does not come from within the child’s sense of corporality but is constructed vis a vis an idea) and thus is experienced as tragically and irrecoverably fragmented. ‘Subjectivity does include the feeling of immediacy and intimacy,’ notes Deborah Anna Luepnitz (964); subjectivity is an interpellation exterior to the self. Conversely, as I have argued above, Winnicott perceives the body as an irreducible locus of self-making: for him, the self is integrated psychosomatically from within, thanks to the accepting environment of the maternal embodied specularisation.

Second, for both Lacan and Winnicott, the body–language relation is closely connected to the child’s formative mirror stage experience. As I have inadvertently demonstrated in the previous section, Lacan does not conceptualise the mother as the child’s initial Other. This is because for him the mother–child dyad belongs to the early pre-subjective maze of the Imaginary from which the child has to dig itself by entering into the Symbolic. In ‘The Mirror Stage,’ Lacan explicitly claims that the fact that after birth the child retains ‘certain humoral residues of the maternal organism’ confirms the ‘specific prematurity of birth’ (1949, 78, emphasis original). For Lacan, the mother-child blurring continues non-organically throughout the Imaginary phase, as, in the words of Lewis A. Kirshner, ‘there is no room in the ideal mother–child relationship for a distinction between the hallucinated maternal breast … and the encounter with the real object (2012, 120). Since the mother and the child are not conceptualised as two separate beings, their relationship is hardly possible. As a result, for Lacan, the child’s maturation means self-defence. For example, he describes the process of ego-formation in military terms of a ‘fortified camp’ or ‘two opposed fields of battle’ (1949, 78). In The Transmission of Affect, Teresa Brennan uses the same metaphors to describe the neoliberal subject’s efforts to secure its boundaries against the ‘unsolicited emotional intrusions of the other’ (2004, 15). Brennan attributes this type of subjectivity to the cultural expulsion of the mother (12–13).

Contrary to this separatist model, Winnicott views the mother’s physicality not as a constraint to the child’s development, but as its sine qua non condition. For him, the mother is the ‘precursor of the mirror stage,’ because in his view, it is the mother’s ‘technique of holding, of bathing, of feeding, everything she [does] for the baby’ that adds up to the child’s first idea of the other, which is not hostile but sustaining (1973, 86–7). Consequently, Winnicott rebuts Lacan’s belief in the subject’s solitariness,
irreparable lack and corporeal self-alienation, maintaining – in line with Bowlby – that the type of the primary bond forms a blueprint for one’s sense of corporality and one’s psychic disposition. Underlining the constitutive role of good-enough mothering, the British author maintains that children who have been mothered enough are later able to experience the world with trust, because the ‘ego-supportive environment is introjected and built into the individual’s personality’ (Winnicott 1958, 35) and the body is experienced as ‘the place wherein one securely lives’ (1973, 194). The initial bond fosters the child’s uninterrupted psychosomatic existence (the psyche securely indwells in the soma) and the child it is not coerced but encouraged to securely experience the world.

Third, Lacan’s and Winnicott’s models of the primary bond locate them on antipodes when it comes to the question of relationality. For Lacan, the subject’s relation to the world is ‘originally, inaugurally, profoundly wounded’ (1988a, 167). The original absence of good-enough mothering becomes prototypical for the subject’s relational incompetence. Since for Lacan the primary object is but an ‘index raised toward an absence’ (1958, 571), the subject becomes geared towards irretrievable ideals and cannot be nourished by empirical relationships. In ‘Seminar V’ Lacan famously writes: ‘There is no support for love . . .: to give one’s love is precisely and essentially to give as such nothing of what one has, because it is precisely in so far as one does not have it that there is a question of love’ (1988b, 30). Elsewhere, he explains that:

the individual’s very specular presence to the other … uncovers his ego-related illusion regarding a consciousness of the body as frozen, while the power of object a … centers this consciousness [and] reduces his reflection in the objects a’ of omnivalent competition to the status of vanities. (1958, 570)

This phantasmatic fixation on irretrievable ideals produces a state of permanent melancholia, as the true object of desire is forever void. ‘Life does not want to be healed’ (1988a, 233) concludes Lacan.

The situation vastly differs in the case of Winnicott. Even though, like Lacan, he accepts the existence of the self’s internal intransparency, he does not perceive it as defining for the self’s relational capacities. This is because the ‘incommunicado element’ becomes considerably outbalanced by the experience of having been mothered. Good-enough mothering breeds in the self a sense of ‘a continuity of being’ (1953, 17, emphasis mine) which directs it towards relationality, rather than fixate it on an irreparable lack. ‘We differ from Freud. He was for curing symptoms. We are concerned with living persons, whole living and loving’ (Guntrip (1975) in Luepnitz, 958), explains the British author. For Winnicott then, one is not primarily driven by an insatiable desire, but oriented towards empirically experienced relationships with real-life people.

Four, the two models of subjectivity/selfhood engage with the questions of human vulnerability and failure. As we have seen with Lacan, the imago’s perfection proves disastrous for the social formation and functioning of the subject. The subject gets hooked on epigones of the initial imago and is unable to co-creatively engage in relational exchange. The scenario is entirely different for Winnicott. He maintains that the child must experience the mother as vulnerable and failing, because this is
exactly what allows the two to ongoingly negotiate their relational pattern. If the mother always ‘knows best,’ the child is unable to contribute anything of its own:

mothers who have had several children begin to be so good at the technique of mothering that they do all the right things at the right moments, and then the infant who has begun to become separate from the mother has no means of gaining control of all the good things that are going on. (Winnicott 1960, 592)

If all the good things come from the mother and are not mutually created, they become destructive for the child. The mother’s perfection becomes an ‘impingement’; it annihilates the child’s agency and its sense of empowerment. Winnicott goes on to say that if the child is constantly submitted to annihilating experiences, it becomes unable to integrate psychosomatically. Instead, it develops what he calls a ‘false self,’ that starts to exist ‘only on the basis of a continuity of reactions to impingement and of recoveries from such reactions’ (1960, 594). Children whose mothers do not admit their own vulnerability and possibility of failure are simply not mothered at all.

Mapping the figure of the perfect mother onto the Lacanian mirror stage scenario, we can see a striking similarity between the perfect mother and the ideal-I image. Both are perfect and irresponsible, relegating the child to a state of inadequacy and solitude. Neither of them mothers. Thus, from the Winnicottian perspective, the Lacanian imago may be viewed as a foundational impingement in the child’s life. As a result, as the British author would maintain, the child develops a profoundly false self, reactive to the demands of the ideal-I. The Lacanian subject may be thus construed as derivative of what John Bowlby terms ‘maternal privation,’ that is an absence of the mother (1951). Lacan then, quite inadvertently, theorises a subject that has never been mothered and which is set on a quest for unattainable objects, re-enacting the original trauma of solitude. An ideal object, as we have seen, can never be good-enough.

Finally, all these differences – including the relation between body and language, the constitutive role of the mirror stage, and the questions of human relationality, vulnerability and failure – are closely reflected in the affective mode of the two authors’ writings. On the one hand, Lacan’s solipsism marks his works with a paradigmatic morbid obscurity. He not only bathes in expressions of lack and alienation, but also brings the human psycho-dynamics down to the wish of death. Winnicott’s relationality, on the other hand, sets his affective vectors exactly opposite; his writings are straightforward and largely optimistic. He does not hesitate to write about pleasure, enjoyment and ‘the magic of imaginative and creative living’ (1967a, 128–139; [1971] 2005, xvi). I will come back to the question of the two authors’ affective dominants in the concluding section.

In the academic context, the differences between the Lacanian motherless subject and the Winnicottian mothered self locate the two authors in disparate positions within the field of social studies and, more generally, within the field of Western philosophical thought. Lacan’s subject turns out Platonian in that it mimetically strives to establish itself in relation to an ungraspable Ideal, while its immediate empirical experience, much like that of Platonian prisoners, remains ‘among the shadows of death’ (1956, 263). Winnicott fares different. By structuring his theory around the notion of the emotionally supportive caregiver, he breaks away from the phallogocentric tradition, challenging not only the Cartesian cogito, but also the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas,
who, like Lacan, arrives at a relational impasse. In his writings, the French philosopher extensively elaborates on the concept of the Other, which refers to an abstractly conceived human being, who is ‘inadmissibly different’ from us and who obliges us to respond (2004). Answering this call becomes for Levinas our basic yet futile ethical task, since the Other is inadmissible in its otherness. The hierarchical structure of the Levinasian Other-I encounter (the Other is always commanding and we are always failing to answer the call) places his philosophy in line with Lacan, whose imago analogue is the inadmissible Other. At the same time, Levinas's philosophy is irreconcilable with Winnicott whose efforts are to affirm a human-to-human connection and break the pattern of dominance/submission. By insisting on the primacy of the mothering experience, Winnicott also dismantles Lacan’s understanding of the Symbolic. Instead of viewing culture as castrating and paternal, he proposes to see it as an outgrowth of the original transitional space created between the mother and the child, where both the mother and the child co-create and constantly renegotiate their relational pattern (1971, 87–114). Within this frame, they may securely fail and reconcile, thus maintaining agency not as I-ideals, but as two vulnerable human beings.

The final section of this article applies the above discussion of Lacan’s and Winnicott’s theories to the field of American studies, which in my view continues to draw from the Cartesian-Levinasian-Lacanian tradition, rather than from Winnicott. I suggest that introducing Winnicott to the American studies scholarship would not only significantly transform its literary and critical theory, but also shed much needed light on the muted areas of American culture, such as the questions of human inherent relationality, vulnerability and co-dependence.

**Lacan, Winnicott, and American studies**

Both Lacan and Winnicott have significantly impacted the way we may think of ourselves. Deborah Anna Luepnitz notes that when we theorise the human being, ‘the Winnicottian “I” relate’ and ‘the Lacanian “I”/it speak(s)’ (964) should be added to the canonical composite of ‘the medieval “I” believe; the Cartesian “I” think; the Romantic “I” feel; … the existential “I” choose [and] the Freudian “I” dream’ (Ragland-Sullivan 1986 in Luepnitz 2009, 964). Psychoanalyst Peter Green, whose work is informed both by Lacan and Winnicott, regards them as the two most influential thinkers after Freud (in Luepnitz 2009, 960). Despite this enormous gravity of both authors, Winnicott, as I have noted, remains little known within the American studies scholarship. I believe that the basic reason for this absence, apart from the historical and discursive factors, is that Lacan’s solipsistic ego-centrism quite smoothly complies with both the American ego-centered myth of individualism and the neoliberal ‘culture of narcissism’ (Lasch 1991), while Winnicott’s relationality poses a major problem to the structural layout of this culture. And even though American founding myths have constantly been challenged since at least the 1960s (see, for example, Bercovitch and Jehlen 1986), few authors anchor their critiques in the questions of the maternal (Rich 1976; Chodorow 1978; Ruddick 1989; Brennan 2004). Fewer still employ the Winnicottian perspective.

In the post-war U.S., both psychoanalysis and cultural studies have assimilated the Lacanian subjectivity, while almost completely bypassing Winnicott. According to Marianne Hirsch, ‘American psychoanalysis is essentially based on ego psychology’
(1981, 211) and Jessica Benjamin asserts that ‘In America, object relations theory was eclipsed by ego psychology, [which was] the position of mainstream theorists in the post-war period’ (1988, 247). Teresa Brennan directly points out the aptitude of the Lacanian frame for the neoliberal context: ‘Lacan was not an ahistorical poststructuralist. Rather, he argues that we are in the grip of an ego’s era – an era that begins in the seventeenth century and climaxes in the present, leaving us all fairly mad’ (1993, 1). Lacan’s (self-)alienated ego is both an extension of the Cartesian mind/body split and a perverted offspring of the Enlightenment self-made man myth. Both Descartes’s cogito and the Enlightenment humanism complexly resonate with the American ethos of individual autonomy and self-reliance, while posing a dissonance with the Winnicottian admission of relationality and failure.

As a result, a large strand of American studies scholarship theorises contemporary neoliberal sociality as one visibly reminiscent of the Lacanian model described above. Laurent Berlant’s Cruel Optimism, Renata Salecl’s Tyranny of Choice, Eva Illouz’s Cold Intimacies (2007), Arlie Hochschild’s Managed Heart (2012), and Ann Cvetkovich’s Depression: A Public Feeling (2012) are among the widely quoted publications that lament a subject submitted to the phallogocentric laws of neoliberal capitalism. The most overtly Lacanian Slavoj Žižek directly applies Lacan’s ideas to explain the mechanism of commodity consumption. In The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology (2012), Žižek elaborates on the analogy between objects little a and commodities, as both endlessly defer fulfilment. Lauren Berlant similarly argues that in neoliberal societies ‘people maintain their binding to modes of life that threaten their well-being . . . [based on] fantasies of the good life’ (16–18), which she calls cruel optimism. The Canadian affect theory proponent Brian Massumi (2002) is also remarkable in his take on subjectivity, as in his major book Parables for the Virtual he theorises the human being as irreducibly corporeal and imbued with subliminal, visceral intensities that are constitutive with of their engagement with the world, without even once mentioning the significance of the primary bond. This renders his understanding of affects very abstract. He defines them as ‘pre-personal’ and ‘pre-cognitive,’ that is autonomous and unexplainable, as if exterior to the self, with no relation to one’s early constitutive bodily experience. Massumi clearly differs from Winnicott, for whom personhood is already made at the precognitive level.

Much feminist theory follows suit. For example, the otherwise imposing anthology Feminism-Art-Theory (2001) makes no mention of the maternal experience as a possible field of aesthetic and academic reflection, and The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader (2003) provides only one chapter on mothering (subsumed under the section ‘Representation,’ alongside articles on black female spectatorship and the male gaze), while lavishly addressing the topics of technology, mass culture, and the body, the latter being completely dissociated from maternal themes. I would thus venture a claim that it is the masculine character of American culture, along with its dismissal of lived mothering (see Thurer 1995; Brennan 2004; Douglas and Michaels 2005), that stands behind the general preference for Lacan among the American studies scholars. I also believe that it is the paternal orientation of the American studies scholarship that at least partly elucidates the recent flourishing of multiple branches of the humanities that address anything but the maternal, among them gender studies, queer studies, post-humanism, transhumanism, cyberstudies, new materialism and, most astonishingly,
bulk of affect theory. The following passage from Rosi Braidotti is exemplary of the epistemological and affective mode of the contemporary American studies scholarship:

Zoe – like Lacan’s pre-discursive, Kristeva’s *chora* and Irigaray’s maternal femininity—becomes for Agamben the ever-receding horizon of an alterity, which has to be included as necessarily excluded in order to sustain the framing of the subject in the first place. This introduces finitude as a constitutive element within the framework of subjectivity. It also fuels an affective economy of loss and melancholia at the heart of the subject. (2006, 39)

In light of my discussion of Lacan and Winnicott it is hardly surprising to learn that, once the maternal has been relegated to the area of a pre-discursive non-subjectivity, the dominant structure of feeling is that of a loss and melancholia. However, crucially for my point, on the surface, neoliberalism is all about enjoyment.

Contemporary American culture has increasingly become a culture spec(ta)cularisation. The subjects are caught up in a web of seductive imagos/objects little a – the blink of commercials, the lavishness of shopping options – which compel them to incessantly enjoy themselves. The selfie in particular stands emblematic of this craze. It is a technology-based social practice through which one creates and reaffirms oneself not in an embodied relation with another human being, but in relation to one’s phantasmatic ideal-I, which is pieced together through commodity consumption. This practice is based on a collective fantasy of an ever-perfecting ableism, illusorily available through a production of commodity-mediated imagos. These imagos are then placed on social media and start to interact with each other, shifting sociality to the realm of a fantasy world. Importantly for my argument, the selfie reiterates Lacan’s mirror stage scenario, where the Other is not an empirical human being, but a projected phantasm that nonetheless, as I have argued before, responds to the basic human need to attach. It can be stated then that the fun-oriented American culture, however seductive it may seem, in fact perpetuates and masks Lacan’s narcissistic, solitary subject. This subject, having not been able to integrate from within, outsources the care of its fragmented ego to brands, ‘authenticating’ itself through commodity consumption and internalising brands as parts of the ‘I.’

This cultural dynamic, I maintain, is a result of an original absence of a good-enough, embodied, relational bond. Not surprisingly, the most successful commercial taglines overtake the Winnicottian mothering poetics. McDonald’s ‘I’m loving it,’ Disneyland’s ‘The happiest place on Earth,’ Philips’s ‘Express yourself every day,’ L’Oreal’s ‘Because you’re worth it,’ Coca Cola’s ‘Make it real,’ Burger King’s ‘Be Your Way,’ Dove’s ‘Real beauty,’ and the insistent ‘I’ attached to all Apple devices are manipulative in that they make the very same promise that for Winnicott is fulfilled by good-enough mothering: love, happiness, self-expression, a sense of self-worth and authenticity. These commercials offer a simulation of maternal care by hijacking its poetics to stand in its place. However, no matter how successfully they penetrate the psyche, they cannot replace the empirical experience of having been mothered, offering instead what Lauren Berlant has called an empty halo of promise (2011, 23–50). This is a profoundly unsettling experience, which may be described as cold intimacy, nomadism, cruel optimism or depression, and which is pacified by the neoliberal enjoyment command, so brilliantly described by Sara Ahmed (2010) in *The Promise of Happiness*. Some examples of this injunction include Coca Cola’s ‘Enjoy,’ Time Warner’s ‘Enjoy
Better,’ Hampden Beer’s ‘Enjoy yourself,’ Honda’s ‘Technology you can enjoy,’ Nissan’s ‘Enjoy the ride’ and so on. It needs to be noted that this motherless carnival of fun, which creates an entirely artificial scenario of perpetual ableism, is only made possible by whitewashing human vulnerability and temporal finitude. As such, the fun-oriented cultural dynamics can be viewed as an impingement which reproduces Winnicottian ‘false selves,’ reactive to the cultural command of limitlessness and eternal youth. What would change, however, if contemporary American culture more readily admitted Winnicott’s perspective?

The result, I believe, would be quite paradoxical. Shifting the dominant from the selfie-like spec(ta)cularisation to the embodied, co-creative exchange terminates the collective phantasm of simulated happiness and challenges the disastrous commercialisation of feeling. Instead, it ushers in a relational pattern that eludes the logic of neoliberal capitalism and recognises human fragility and limitedness.\textsuperscript{13} Crucially, this recognition eases up the cultural repression of death, which is constitutive of the present melancholia-enjoyment impasse. Somewhat grandiloquently Jungian psychoanalyst Zenon Waldemar Dudek writes that ‘Maternal love is a treasure for every grown-up human being. It is thanks to that love that they can live realising that there is death’ (in Schier, 2014, 88, trans. J.W.). Paradoxically then, admitting the constitutive validity of the mothering bond along with the areas of human vulnerability and finitude, transforms the American affective scenario from inadvertent morbidity into one of self-reflexive moderation. Not having to face up to one’s publicised ideal, one can intimately enjoy the good-enough. Not surprisingly, Deborah Anna Luepnitz notes that ‘Winnicott introduces the comic tradition into psychoanalysis, while Lacan sustains [s] Freud’s tragic/ironic vision,’ placing the two thinkers on the ‘comic/humanist’ versus ‘tragic/post-humanist’ continuum (Luepnitz 2009, 957, 975).

What is more, introducing the Winnicottian perspective qualitatively reconfigures the very idea of culture. Construed as an outgrowth of the transitional space, culture becomes a ‘shared reality,’ transformative through empirical relational exchange, rather than mediated through imagos ((1971] 2005, 128–148). Since the prototypical Other does not annihilate but sustains, selfhood can be securely enjoyed through intersubjective proximation, rather than defensively protected against the intrusion of others. Such culture admits failure and is marked by a flexibility of pattern, co-creation and playfulness, instead of competition and achievement. It is inclusive, giving preference to things done together instead of measuring oneself against the others. It prioritises pleasure over rankings.

By the same token, Winnicott’s maternal perspective boldly intervenes into the scope and poetics of American studies, since it recasts American myths in a new light. The homosocial bond, which remains a lively theme in American mainstream productions, can now be more clearly viewed as derivative of the incipient deficiency of good-enough mothering. American culture incessantly retells repackaged narratives of biologically unrelated father–son couples (see Fiedler 1998; Baym 1981; Jeffords 1997) who interact ‘without depending at all on the other sex’ (Easthope 2016, 19), thus completely foreclosing the mother. In 2014, Urszula Nadrowska analysed 391 Oscar-winning or Oscar-nominated films released after the year 2000 to discover that only 17 feature mother characters significant to the plot and that none of them is good-enough (Nadrowska 2014). Willing or not, these films, set in the contemporary U.S., illustrate
the cultural reproduction of subjects who have neither been mothered nor are able to
mother, because mothers, like everybody else, are submitted to the task-and-success-
oriented pressures. And even though the more recent, critically acclaimed produc-
tions, among them Richard Linklater’s Boyhood (2014) and Brie Larson’s Room (2015),
do feature mothers who strive to provide their children with a ‘holding environment,’
they are vastly outnumbered by paternally oriented films, such as Birdman or Whiplash,
to which Boyhood lost five of its six Oscar nominations.

Presently, as I have shown over the span of this article, much of the American studies
scholarship – including anthologies of theory and criticism, readers and salient pub-
lications in the field – retains a paternal orientation, which preferences the Lacanian
subject over the Winnicottian self. I am aware of only two high-profile academics who
have incorporated Winnicott into their critiques of culture. The New York-based Jessica
Benjamin and the Israeli Bracha Ettinger both engage with the questions of the
maternal, utilising the Winnicottian framework. In The Bonds of Love, Benjamin
critically traces the parallel between the Lacanian imago and the idealised father figure,
noting that in the mirror stage ‘the child idealises the father because the father [who is
perceived as representing the outside world] is the magical mirror that reflects the self
as it wants to be – the ideal in which the child wants to recognise himself’ (100). In
a footnote she adds that ‘this role of the father lies unrecognised behind Lacan’s well-
known concept of the mirror phase [in which] the child’s use of the mirror as a
projection of an imaginary coherent self (the first constitution of the self in alienation)
[can be] more accurately represented in the relationship of identification with the
idealised father as mirror of desire, with all its grandiosity’ (270). While Benjamin’s
ideas neatly tie up with the masculinist, paternal culture of the ‘great America,’ she
offers her own model of ego-formation, derivative of what she calls the maternal
capacity for thirdness. She understands this term as a ‘vantage point’ adopted by the
mother outside ‘a mutually influencing interaction,’ which ‘grasp[s] its two-way direc-
tionality’ and recognises the child and herself as two separate yet like subjects (2007, 1).
Benjamin thus defies the Hegelian dominance/submission dialectics, reiterated by the
Lacanian imago, and reaches out into a poetics of a ‘co-created reality’ and ‘co-created
rhythm’ (2, 17), which are analogous to the Winnicottian transitional space.

Bracha Ettinger, on the other hand, engages with Winnicott in a register reminiscent
of Jungism and philosophy of the Other. She coins the term ‘matrixial borderspace’ to
refer to a universal transsubjective domain where ‘becoming-together precedes being-one’
and which lies beyond linguistic signification (2006, 72, emphasis original). Like
Winnicott, she perceives the mother as the child’s prototypical Other, or a ‘(m)
Other,’ who is recognised and loved ‘not as a mirror image of the self, [but] as other,
not self’ (2014, 10). In accordance with the British author, Ettinger does not think the
human as hopelessly (self-)alienated, but as participating in a panhuman force of life, as
the ‘[e]ntangled aerials of the psyche, transconnected kernels, inform the individual
subject throughout life, starting with the most archaic phase in a psychic dimension
shared with a female body and maternal figure’ (2014, 1). Ettinger brilliantly compares
Lacan’s and Winnicott’s formative scenarios to show how a good-enough primary
relation can wring the individual from solipsism and morbidity:
[For Winnicott] glimpses of otherness are accessed by primary compassion and awe, wonder and fascinance that precede the Lacanian Mirror Stage and circumvent the narcissistic structure to continue beyond it, beside it. ... Primary awe balances fear; primary compassion balances shame. (2014, 18)

Ettinger’s first (m)Other is not feared but loved in her efforts to provide for the child’s well-being from within her own position of vulnerability and limitedness. This fosters a sociality in which, as Ettinger puts it, ‘[i]ndividuation does not require the negation of metatrophic transconnectedness,’ but ‘is a source of aesthetical and ethical openings where the fragility of the self meets the vulnerability of the Other’ (2014, 15, 11). Like Benjamin, Ettinger challenges the neoliberal social contract, offering a powerful platform to rethink the patterns of bond-making and care.

Summing up, the Winnicottian principle of good-enough mothering, which does not succumb to the neoliberal problematic celebration of the perfect ego, breathes new air into American studies. It breaks through the Lacanian fixation on ungraspable object-ideals and shifts the focus onto empirical relations of commitment. By theorising human relationality in a way that, as Myra Hird puts it, ‘stands obstinately outside liberal notions of a closed economy’ (Hird 2007, 14), Winnicott’s theory challenges the phantasmatic character and narcissism of neoliberal cultural practices and overcomes the depression-enjoyment cul-de-sac that informs much of the recent American studies scholarship. By admitting the areas of human vulnerability and finitude, Winnicott offers a holistic approach to the human condition, one that does not repress death and allows for failure. He boldly challenges the Lacanian orphaned subject and introduces a relational, vital self that is made possible through a recognition of the basic human need to attach and of the constitutive role of maternal specularisation. Such perspective deflates rivalry and enhances co-existence, promoting a culture that thinks ‘(m)otherwise’ (Liss 2009, xix), opening new paths both for American studies and the American social contract.

Notes

1. Among such sources are anthologies: Vincent B. Leitch (ed.), The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, (2001), Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan’s Literary Theory: An Anthology, (2004) and Patricia Waugh (ed.) Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide, (2006), Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle’s Critical Theory since Plato, (2006); readers: David Lodge and Nigel Wood’s Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader, (2008), Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan, A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader, (2009), and even Mary Eagleton’s Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader, (2010); and textbooks: Terry Eagleton’s Literary Theory: An Introduction, (2008), John Storey’s Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction, (2018), Sara Upstone’s Literary Theory: A Complete Introduction, (2017), Chris Barker and Emma A Jane’s Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice, (2016), Andrew Edgar & Peter Sedgwick’s Cultural Theory: The Key Thinkers, (2002), and Raman Selden & Peter Widdowson’s A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory, (2017). Also, books from American psychoanalytically oriented scholars devoted to representations of motherhood recognise Lacan and disregard Winnicott: E. Ann Kaplan’s (1992) Motherhood and Representation and Donna Bassin et al.’s (1996) Representations of Motherhood.

2. The similarity in the titles ‘The Mirror Stage’ and ‘The Mirror Role of the Mother’ is not accidental. Winnicott’s article was a response to Lacan’s.
The term ‘Other,’ which comes from the French philosophical and psychoanalytic tradition, is foreign to the Winnicottian register. I introduce this term to relate Winnicott’s writings to the philosophies pertinent to American studies.

Winnicott coined the term ‘good-enough mother’ to refer to a primary caregiver (not necessarily a biological mother) who ‘makes active adaptation to the infant’s needs.’ Such person creates a ‘holding environment’ which facilitates the child’s development by gradually lessening her adaptation according to the child’s ‘growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration’ (1953, 13–14, 1960). The concept remains foundational for motherhood studies.

Since for Lacan the primary identification happens within the field of the Symbolic (that is the field of a structurally conceived language and culture), it is logical for him to write about subjects, contrary to Winnicott, who roots his theory in his empirical practice in paediatrics. I will follow the distinction between the Lacanian subject and the Winnicottian self throughout the article.

Winnicott understood therapy as a co-operative endeavour between the therapist and the patient, reparative of the patient’s original damage caused by the absence or insufficiency of good-enough mothering. This is contrary to Lacan, for whom the analyst ‘is the one who is supposed to know’ (Phillips 1993, 121). In her article, Deborah Anna Luepnitz remarks on the suicides attributed to Lacan’s therapeutic practice (976).

Winnicott himself on numerous occasions admitted that he does not understand Lacan (see Luepnitz, Vanier, Conway).

This passage from Lacan is exemplary here: ‘When we want to get at what was before the serial games of speech in the subject and what is prior to the birth of symbols, we find it in death, from which his existence derives all the meaning it has. Indeed, he asserts himself with respect to others as a death wish; if he identifies with the other, it is by freezing him in the metamorphosis of his essential image, and no being is ever conjured up by him except among the shadows of death’ (1956, 263).

Levinas is in my view rightly criticised by Luce Irigaray who argues that the French philosopher inscribes his concept of the Other into the very phallogocentrism of traditional Western philosophy (1992, 178–188). Julia Kristeva forms a connecting bridge between Irigaray and Levinas, defining the child as ‘one’s first other’ (2012, 132), yet she moves within a Lacanian poetics that scarcely admits Winnicott’s straightforwardness.

Some of the famous American academics whose work is inspired by Lacan include: Teresa Brennan, Shoshana Felman, Jane Gallop, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (Luepnitz 2009, 959). It is impossible to provide a similar list of Winnicottians.

I restrict myself to the scholarship familiar to me, without addressing large and important segments of American studies, including ethnicity studies, as they extend beyond my area of expertise.

I have analysed such simulated substitution of good-enough mothering in ‘Empty Maternal: Simulating Maternal Care in Marina Abramović’s The Artist is Present’ (2018).

Myra Hird’s ‘The Corporeal Generosity of Maternity’ is exemplary of this beyond-capitalist capacity of embodied mothering.

For example, as of now, the U.S. labour law does not provide mothers with a paid maternity leave. This makes the country the only OECD member offers ‘no statutory entitlement to paid leave on a national basis,’ which would require business and corporations to offer paid maternity leave to their employees (OECD 2017).

Ettinger writes: ‘The fragile I senses the vulnerability in the Other in resonance, consonance, and dissonance before and beyond thinking’ (2014, 19).

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http://www.ia.uw.edu.pl/en/our-staff/faculty-and-staff-by-department/department-of-cultural-studies/505-justyna-wierzchowska

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