

The New York Review of Books

On the NYR Daily this week

On Monday, we published “[The Psychopharmacology of Everyday Life](#)”—or, as its author, the psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster, joked was her alternative title, “Freud’s Brain on Drugs.” The argument of her long essay is, in essence, that modern psychiatry prescribes a pill for every mental ill without treating the underlying causes of what ails us—and that talking cures merit another look. Webster mines Freud’s original ideas for deeper insights into problems that drugs merely ameliorate on the surface.

“Freud can be very persuasive and helpful with the weirdness of life once you can hear his ironic tone and take him a little less seriously when necessary,” Jamieson told me earlier this week. This was actually a good description of her *modus operandi* in the piece—the playfulness and welcome tone of impiety (in contrast to the sacerdotal mystique that Freud often comes wrapped in). Jamieson has a busy psychoanalytic practice in Soho, New York, but also teaches at the New School and CUNY. How did she fall into this line of work, I asked.

“Suffering, quite a lot actually,” she said, “and being entirely confused about why and what happened to me. Of course, also some very important moments in psychoanalysis—which I started very young, at nineteen—that helped me feel less confused and eventually take more pleasure in life.”

The impulse from her own experience to help a person who is in crisis has stayed with her: Jamieson refers in the piece to working in a hospital during training. I was interested to know how this had influenced her desire to win back a part for psychotherapy from the dominance of medical psychiatry.

“I am fascinated by the experiments of psychoanalysts and existential psychiatrists in the mid-1950s to the 1970s from R.D. Laing to Deleuze and Guattari at La Borde Clinic, to Françoise Dolto and Maud Mannoni with children in Paris, all working with those who suffered from severe forms of mental illness,” Jamieson explained. “There was a courage, openness, and humanitarian effort that is unequalled... The work is painstaking, delicate, and feels like a dying art. I really wish something like this was more possible here. I miss

working in the hospital—but also don't want to work in a hospital the way they operate now. So the piece really comes from this frustrated desire.”



Photo by Isabel Asha Penzlien

Her intellectual influences are similarly heterodox and inclined to the philosophical—her first book was about not only Lacan, but also Theodor Adorno and Alain Badiou. And her next project, published in 2013, was a collaboration with the philosopher Simon Critchley, about *Hamlet. Hamlet?*

“I realized that a number of psychoanalysts and philosophers had taken on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and that these interpretations were outside the canon of scholarly work on Shakespeare. These readings were all a bit wild and unhinged and I liked this and so did Simon,” she said. “More than this, there is an importance to the psychoanalytic project as Oedipus and Hamlet are twins for Freud—one being the inverse of the other. Hamlet is part of the origin story of psychoanalysis in a way that I felt hadn’t been given enough of a place.”

She has just published a new book, *Conversion Disorder: Listening to the Body in Psychoanalysis*, and often sees patients back-to-back for seven or eight hours a day. I wanted to know what she does to unwind.

“Recently, I’ve taken up surfing,” she said. “I’m not very good, but it’s a new form of psychoanalysis for me. I’ve discovered new layers of my hysteria from wrestling with the ocean. It requires pure surrender.”

I’m glad I asked. Consider that essay assigned, Jamieson.

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Matt Seaton

Editor, NYR Daily