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An Ethnography of Compulsive Repetition

Into the Loop

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An Ethnography of Compulsive Repetition

SAMUELE COLLU

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PRESS

To my first love,

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Acknowledgments

When someone I care about — for whichever reason and in whichever way — doesn't mention me in their acknowledgments or when they seem to have forgotten, or repressed, in their own writing the impact of my contributions to their conceptual life, it hurts. I feel the opening of a narcissistic wound pulsing in a tiny spot right where a breathing psyche encounters my ruminating stomach. Then I breathe through the wound and allow myself to remember that nothing is really mine, that I never had a single idea that wasn't refracting someone else's idea, and that, in fact, there has never been a *single* author in the first place. But still, it hurts. This is to say that I am sorry if you thought you should be named in what follows but you aren't. If the next time we meet you feel like telling me you wanted to be in this book, but you aren't . . . drinks are on me, I promise.

My ethnographic research would not have been possible without the openness of the many psychotherapists and patients in Buenos Aires who allowed me to observe live sessions of couple therapy behind the one-way mirror. Observing couples undergoing their own therapy sessions has deeply impacted my psycho-affective life, and I have an immense gratitude for all the couples who agreed to be observed while processing intimate impasses, wounds, and ongoing transformations. I hope that, if they were to read this book, they could see the passion with which I followed their therapeutic journeys. This book re-presents only refracted fragments of their emotional life.

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over and over again healed more than one wound (and, who knows, maybe even opened a few new ones). While we watched ongoing therapy sessions together, you also accepted with ironic generosity temporarily acting as my therapists, gifting me with innumerable insights to tackle my own personal struggles. Thank you.

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ing curiosity toward the crazy anthropologist who believed that medieval mysticism, ethnographic genres of presence, and couple therapy could be brought together offered a much-appreciated intellectual harbor outside the Anthropology Department. At UC San Francisco, Vincanne Adams challenged my thinking in graceful, generative, and insightful ways, and I am deeply thankful for her mentorship.

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I am a resonating chamber of the movements that emerged between us.

INTRODUCTION

Buenos Aires, Argentina. August 2013. I'm sitting in a room with three psycho-therapists looking at a screen in contemplative silence. The screen is connected to a closed-circuit television system live streaming a session of couple therapy taking place in the room next door. The two patients in therapy, Paula and Thiago, are talking to Wanda, their therapist. Their voices cut through the walls.

"We went to see a therapist two years ago, but he gave up," Paula says to Wanda.

"I didn't give up!" Thiago replies loudly. "You were so miserable after those sessions! No?"

"What? The therapist asked *you* to leave during our last session!"

"It wasn't working!" Thiago replies. "You talked and talked but nothing changed, like when you went to that Lacanian psychoanalyst. . . . Nothing changed! Nothing! Nothing changes."

"So . . . you want *me* to change? That's it? You come to therapy so that *I* can change?"

"I meant the relationship!" Thiago explains to Wanda. "The relationship didn't change."

"So that's it! You just wanted me to change. You wanted to leave me alone with the therapist!"

"I said the relationship! And the therapist didn't ask me to leave, she just didn't leave me any—"

"So, you thought that *I* was the one who had to change?"

Waiting for a reply, Paula looks at Wanda and then straight into the camera. "Do you see? *Do you see?* That's what I have to deal with!"

"I said the relationship!" Thiago screams at the camera.

. . .

Ten minutes earlier. The video camera is running. Paula is waiting for Thiago to arrive and looks nervously at the screen of her phone. After a couple of minutes, Thiago hurries into the room and sits down. Paula is about to tell him something, but Wanda enters. She sits down and explains that she is using the video camera to allow a team of therapists and one anthropologist to observe the session in another room. "Yes, Dr. Almibar told us. It's okay," Paula says smiling. Thiago nods silently.

"So, what brings you here to this space?" Wanda asks.

Paula and Thiago glance at each other. Paula gently shakes her head while looking down.

"What do you want me to say?" Thiago says. "I can only offer the final words of someone who's drowning. . . ."

"Do you think you're drowning?" Wanda asks.

Thiago looks quickly into the eye of the camera. "No, no, I think we've already drowned. We're doing bad, bad, bad. . . . We've drowned already. . . . We are drowning."

On the other side of the wall, I am fully absorbed in the screen live streaming the session. The screen displays what the camera is recording, and it feels like Thiago is looking right at me. I stare at the screen, looking back at him. We are both looking at each other without really seeing the other. We are separated by a screen monitor, a wall, and a video camera. I suddenly feel tired, drained, and stuck.

The three psychotherapists close to me are nodding pensively while jotting down some notes. In a moment of suspended silence, the echoes of Thiago's words reverberate across the two rooms. *We're drowning. We're drowning. We've drowned already.* I take out my notebook to write something and discharge a rising anxiety, but nothing comes to my mind. I draw a rectangle.

. . .

Into the Loop is based on ethnographic research I conducted in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where I immersed myself in the theory and practice of systemic couple therapy. Over the course of 2013–14, different teams of systemic psychotherapists allowed me, as an anthropologist, to follow their work and observe over two hundred hours of couple therapy from behind a one-way mirror, a closed-circuit television, or both at once.[1] During this time in Argentina, I also

pursued a research project on the use of hypnosis in a therapeutic context. This led me, among other things, to undergo hypnotherapy as a patient and to film my own sessions.

The couple therapy sessions I observed, together with my hypnotherapy recordings, constitute the empirical ground of the book; but as I was writing it, a lot of other things slipped in.

. . .

Systemic psychotherapists use visual devices, such as the one-way mirror or closed-circuit television, to observe or supervise live sessions of therapy. In a systemic therapy setting, you have a group of therapists in an observing room—usually there are therapists in training among them—while another therapist is conducting the session in the therapy room. The one-way mirror is built into the wall separating the two rooms, allowing the therapists to observe the session without being seen. If there is no one-way mirror, therapists use a closed-circuit television system that broadcasts the live session into the observing room through a video camera installed in the therapy room. In some settings, you can have both the one-way mirror and the closed-circuit television system.

One of the primary concerns of systemic couple therapy is to explore how romantic partners get caught in loops of interaction that can thwart therapeutic transformation or make it difficult to end potentially harmful or abusive relationships. When partners are caught in a loop, they repeat a series of actions, affective habits, and communicative practices that keep their relational problems in place despite recursive attempts to break away from or interrupt what can be experienced as an endless circularity. When partners are stuck in a loop, they barely know who or what started the loop, and, more importantly, they rarely know how to interrupt its circular repetitions.

Yesterday we promised we'd stop fighting over it. How are we back here again?

. . .

A *loop* is a structure, series, or process, the end of which is connected to the beginning—think about a feedback loop. A loop is also an endless strip of tape or film allowing continuous repetition, or a complete circuit for an electric current. In computing, a loop is a programmed sequence of instructions that is repeated until or while a particular condition is satisfied.

To loop is to coil, wind, twist, spiral, make circles with; but it's also to fasten, tie, join, connect, bind, and tether.[2]

. . .

You are coming back home, and the last thing you want is to spend the next hours in a screaming match with your partner. You bought a nice bottle of red wine, you are happy thinking that you will be home soon, and your partner just texted you that they can't wait to see you. But as soon as you get in the house, things scale up faster than a slap of wind. You say something, your partner replies, you add something, they add something too. You are not there yet but, after a few exchanges, you can feel it already—your body is getting warmer, your heart is pounding.

You could try to do something to interrupt the escalation—run to the bathroom and wash your face with cold water or grab a pillow and scream into it—but instead you open your mouth and say *that* thing, the one which opens the door to a five-hour-long fight. You don't want it to happen, but it's already happening. And now you are screaming words that, as soon as they leave your body, you wish you didn't say.

. . .

"*I* didn't give up! *You* were so miserable after those sessions! No?"

"What? The therapist asked you *to leave!"*

. . .

Systemic therapy moves away from linear causality and privileges circular causality. Instead of focusing on how A causes B, this therapeutic model considers A's action as a reaction to B's input, which, in turn, incorporates A's feedback. This circular perspective comes from cybernetics, an interdisciplinary approach that developed mostly in the United States after World War II.

Cybernetics focuses on the capacity of human and nonhuman systems to self-regulate through feedback loops—you have a feedback loop when the output is fed back into the system as input. This implies that the individual is always plugged into a broader system of relations—a choreographic composition of elements that both exceeds and shapes the individual.

During the cybernetic era of the 1950s and '60s, a wide range of disciplines, from military engineering to psychology, embraced the focus on circular exchanges of information between humans, machines, and their environment.[3] In this same period, different traditions of experimental psychology employed visual technologies such as the one-way mirror to pursue a "naturalistic observation" of the interactive loops within families and couples in therapy.[4] The anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1904–80) substantially impacted the development of the systemic therapy model. Bateson drew from anthropology,

ethology, psychology, and cybernetics to show how societies, families, and romantic couples were parts of wider relational systems.[5]

. . .

One of Gregory Bateson's central arguments in favor of the systemic epistemology is that it troubles the Western tendency to understand the human self as separated from the very systems that, in fact, generate it.[6] The self, Bateson writes, is only a small part of a larger system, a "false reification of an improperly delimited part of this much larger field of interlocking processes."[7]

A systemic approach, according to Bateson, supports the idea that the self alone, as an autonomous center of willpower, cannot interrupt a relational loop. To interrupt a loop, you need, first of all, to give in to the possibility that no matter what you think you are, there is a loop that precedes and exceeds you.[8] A loop "whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or of what is popularly called the 'self' or 'consciousness.'"[9]

Bateson explores the therapeutic impact of a systemic perspective in a provocative essay about Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), where he describes how in the first two steps of the Twelve-Step Program, the alcoholic needs to acknowledge their powerlessness over alcohol and surrender to a wider force, a "higher power" that can interrupt the compulsive repetition of the loop. This higher power, according to Bateson, is the emergent property of a system, one bigger than the sum of its parts.

Bateson suggests that the AA approach works because it challenges the alcoholic's reliance on individual willpower and promotes a deeper understanding of how the self's actions are folded within, and impacted by, nonindividual forces and systems.[10] The point here is that whatever the problem, it might be generated and sustained through processes that are happening beneath, beyond, and even despite you.[11]

. . .

"So . . . you want *me* to change? You come to therapy so that *I* can change?"

"*I said* the relationship!"

. . .

The focus on systems and feedback loops, together with the development of information theory, has laid the ground for all sorts of technologies and intellectual traditions that can be traced back to basic cybernetic principles—computers, the internet, military weapons, the Gaia hypothesis, Silvan Tomkins's affect

theory, Gregory Bateson's ecological anthropology, climate change research, screaming at your partner, and compulsively checking your phone.

It can all be looped back to the loopy logic of loops.[12]

. . .

Into the Loop draws from affect theory, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology to address the psychosocial forces that compel people to repeat, interrupt, or drift aside from relational loops. I wrote this book compulsively returning to a small set of refrains, haunting questions that will never find a final answer: Why do people keep returning to relationships that are draining their vitality? How can we interrupt the repetitions that define us, even if just for a second?

The book is also a minor experiment in form or, rather, in rhythm. To drift aside from my own writing loops, I organized *Into the Loop* as a somewhat eclectic choreography of short sections—ranging in length from a few paragraphs to one-liners. These short sections or fragments are written in aspirational resonance with a wide range of authors who develop poetic, literary, and imagistic approaches in anthropology and beyond—and sometimes in a short-form genre too.[13]

. . .

The book's fragments are animated, if not haunted, by different voices—the academic, the personal, and their uncanny in-betweens. This allows me to play with, and ventriloquize, different propositions—conceptual, therapeutic, anthropological, psychoanalytic, or intimate. But there is also some nano-ranting, self-addressed pep talks, mildly surrealist exercises, and the joyful indexing of ephemeral afterimages.

The voicing can be jarring at times. I just like to slap my own thinking out of a looping track with things coming out of nowhere. I also love to repeat repetitions until they catch fire—or at least spark some sparkles in between us. In its quasi-aphoristic undertone, *Into the Loop* nudges the writer and the reader in and out of a series of loops—sometimes we hold hands, sometimes I forget.

. . .

"What? The therapist asked *you* to leave during our last session!"

"It wasn't working! You talked and talked but nothing changed, like when you went to that Lacanian psychoanalyst. . . . Nothing *changed!* Nothing! Nothing *changes.*"

. . .

Thinking and writing through short scenes is also a way to re-present what I've learned about couples by watching live therapy sessions from behind a one-way mirror. The rectangular surface of the one-way mirror led me to think about coupled forms of life as a composition of scenes, a collage of quasi-cinematic moments that are acted out by partners. Therapy sessions can follow a linear narrative, loop onto themselves repeating over and over the same refrains, or be led astray by something completely unexpected.

Scenes emerge and take shape in the therapeutic space, just like scenes emerge and take shape in the ordinariness of coupled intimacy. Some scenes evaporate in the daily repetitions that shape the quotidian. Some scenes acquire force and will be revisited over and over and over again. *That time, that time you said that thing that changed everything. That time.* We build a frame around these moments, and we hang them on the walls we build to separate ourselves from our own becoming.[14]

. . .

Cristina is reading a book on the couch. Hernan is screaming at her. She keeps reading. He keeps screaming. He gives up and goes to the kitchen to pour himself another drink. She picks up her half-full wineglass and contemplates it for a few seconds. She looks at a tiny spot on the edge of the glass where she can see the imprint of her lips. She looks at the white wall in front of her. She screams. The wineglass cuts through the air and breaks into at least seventy-five tiny fragments as it hits the wall. Hernan runs back into the living room. He distractedly contemplates the star-shaped stain of red Malbec on the wall.

"The therapist called," Cristina says. "Our first session of systemic therapy is Friday at 9 a.m."

"What the fuck is systemic therapy? With you it always ends up being some New Age bullshit!"

"That has nothing to do with anything, like always, that's not at all . . . oh, fuck you, Hernan."

. . .

Things went completely astray sometimes. One time it was like five in the morning, and we were walking on the opposite side of the street fighting as if there was no tomorrow. A couple form of the night, screaming drunk and angry things. You *just* wanted to be held tight in our floating couple-bubble, and I *just* wanted the same. A hug could have changed things. We *just*—but I think

we also loved the idea of screaming at each other, with an empty street in between us. Theatrical beauty, romance as spectacle. Love was pumping through our veins like a motherfucker. And we loved returning to that scene.

. . .

"I just want to put couples in touch with their own becoming, the present of their encounter, not the past or the future. Their becoming. That's where a surprising amount of curiosity and love and novelty can come their way. Couples are stuck because they are resisting their becoming."
—*interview with Dr. Marina, sixty-five, (Deleuzian) couples therapist, Buenos Aires*

. . .

My angle of arrival to the question of how to interrupt a loop, or drift aside from it, was deeply personal. As a graduate student in anthropology, I began reading about cybernetics and systemic couple therapy during a period of my life when I was interested in finding a way to improve, reconfigure, or interrupt the loops haunting my own romantic relationship. With a degree of ambitious arrogance, I convinced myself that studying and researching couple therapy, instead of just going to couple therapy, could help even more.

I know, I know—watching so many sessions of live couple therapy probably jammed my psycho-affective life for at least a decade. But when I initially chose to focus on couple therapy, it sounded like a potentially reparative doctoral project, a kind of research that could help me figure something out about my life. When I decided to do my research in Buenos Aires, I was floating through a foggy confusion. I didn't know what to do with my life, and Argentina seemed an easy enough choice considering my partner's family ties there.

Drifting through the haze of an existential disorientation, I landed in Argentina tethering myself to an obsessive question: *How do you interrupt a loop a loop a loop?*[15]

. . .

So I ended up in Argentina because I didn't know what else to do, what else to ask, or how else to do it—I mean interrupting a loop a loop a loop. But Argentina, it turns out, was kind of the perfect place to be lost, to drift through the folds of an open question, to wander in a sleepless crisis mode bouncing from one *asado* to another at 6 a.m., to stumble upon all sorts of technicians, magicians, and artists of the psyche.

. . .

Indeed, Argentina is a unique context for the study of psychotherapeutic treatments, being the country with the highest number of therapeutic practitioners per capita in the world.[16] Argentina has long been known to scholars of the psychological disciplines for its exceptional relationship with psychoanalysis in particular.[17] For heterogeneous historical reasons, which could be connected to migratory flows as well as the insertion of psychoanalysis into the public health system in the 1960s, in Argentina psychoanalytic culture permeates political discourse, everyday conversations, and the media sphere.[18] Especially in Buenos Aires, you could end up talking about psychoanalysis with your taxi driver, or hear a politician use psychoanalytic language to address national issues, or talk to a friend who started psychoanalysis because they just got pregnant and don't want to pass their traumas on to the baby.[19]

. . .

In Buenos Aires, I used to live with my partner in a part of the city informally called Villa Freud, owing to the number of therapists who moved to that area in the 1960s. Six months into my fieldwork, I found myself in the kitchen of our tiny apartment in Villa Freud talking to the plumber about a broken pipe. Without knowing how, I suddenly found myself in a heated debate about the therapeutic efficacy of hypnosis versus Lacanian psychoanalysis. The plumber was a hardcore Lacanian.[20]

. . .

Argentina's distinctive psychoanalytic culture is also entangled with an important tradition of social psychology—whose most representative figure was the psychoanalyst Enrique Pichon-Rivière.[21] In 1958 Pichon-Rivière headed the famous Operación Rosario, where he tried to turn the whole city of Rosario into a therapeutic project through the creation of small therapeutic groups open to the public and which included all sorts of people—from academics to therapists to boxers. Pichon-Rivière's idea was to provoke social change through psychosocial interventions outside the private space of the clinic.[22]

In Buenos Aires, therapy was also literally brought to the streets during the devastating Argentinean economic crisis of 2001–2, where psychotherapists emerged from their private offices to offer free therapy on street corners. During the crisis, psychotherapy was considered an essential public good that people should be able to access freely.[23] Even today, if you are into it, you could find yourself in Buenos Aires participating in a collective session of psychoanalysis where analysts and analysands come together to engage in an experimental form of group analysis.[24]

These are just a few examples of how Argentina's therapeutic culture keeps challenging our assumptions about therapy as a private and intimate process happening behind closed doors. While systemic therapy isn't particularly widespread in Argentina, this model's use of visual technologies seems to further blur the lines between the private and the public space of therapy.

Where does therapy start, and where does it end?

. . .

Buenos Aires, Argentina. May 2013. I enter the dark room following Amalia. The therapy session has already started. I nod to the three therapists in training who are observing the session through the one-way mirror; they are all taking notes. Hesitantly, I walk toward the one-way mirror and stand a few feet away from it. I can see the back of the therapist in the other room. In front of him, facing the mirror, a woman is crying—she is talking about someone named Mateo. Is Mateo her son? Sitting close to her on the couch, a man looks out the window. Is he Mateo? The man says something I can't catch. The woman close to him stops crying.

He says he can't take it anymore; she responds that she is tired of this situation. She looks around for a tissue, but there are no tissues in the therapy room. The therapist on the other side of the mirror looks around and realizes that the tissue box is empty. He apologizes and looks for a tissue in his own backpack. I look around, searching for a tissue.

A few seconds later, I realize that I wouldn't be able to offer it to her anyway because I am on the other side of the one-way mirror. I am caught off guard by this detail. I am so far away and so close to the patients I am observing; I didn't even get their names, but here I am, right in the middle of their intimacy.

I'm watching the session without understanding much, maybe because the surface of the one-way mirror partially reflects my own image and keeps distracting me. In the mirror's reflection, I see the pupils of my eyes. Amalia—the psychotherapist who invited me to my first session behind the mirror—looks at me and says something I don't understand. What did Amalia just say about Mateo's school counselor? Ah, okay, so Mateo is the woman's son. No, he's the man's son. Okay, got it.

. . .

What does it mean not to be able to take it anymore?

. . .

A few minutes later, Amalia taps my shoulder to get my attention. I look at her while she picks up an intercom handset hanging on the right side of the mirror. She presses the button to buzz into the other room. When the phone rings on the other side of the mirror, I emit a nervous whisper. The therapist in the other room picks up the phone: "Yes? Yes, yes . . . yes. Okay."

Amalia puts down the phone. My heart is racing—the call to the other room broke the spell and revealed our presence behind the mirror. I feel suddenly self-aware when I glimpse at the video camera recording the session. The camera is standing on a tripod inside the therapist's room, to the right side of the therapist. I notice that the man on the couch is looking right into the eye of the camera, so I instinctively bring my attention to the monitor on my left side.

A sudden blush reveals my embarrassment at being able to see him without being seen.

. . .

The first time I watched a therapy session from behind the one-way mirror with Amalia and the three therapists in training, I was so overwhelmed by the intimacy with the patients on the other side of the mirror that I partially dissociated from the therapy session. The visual infrastructure that surrounded the session kept reorienting my attention. It was like falling under a spell cast by a play of surfaces—the TV monitors, the video camera, the big rectangular one-way mirror.

I had initially imagined that the visual technologies used during systemic therapy would simply be the means through which I would access live couple therapy—a way to observe what really happens during therapy. But visual technologies, cannot, in fact, be disentangled from this type of therapy.[25] To begin with, the observing audience behind the screen or the mirror is not a passive or invisible eye but can actually participate in the sessions by calling into the therapy room or providing feedback to the lead therapists during a break that usually splits the session in two parts. At the same time, the consciousness of being observed deeply impacts, if not determines, the experience of patients in therapy.

I will write about this extensively, but for now let me say that in the systemic setting of therapy, visual technologies are not only transparent media that allow for a naturalistic observation, but also active presences that generate a rather peculiar therapeutic atmosphere, a relational system that enfolds the couple's loops, creating a broader loop.[26]

. . .

I didn't simply watch therapy through screens: The therapy itself was happening through, with, and sometimes because of the screen. Therapy itself became its own kind of screen.

Or screens their own kind of therapy.

. . .

Into the Loop describes how the systemic setting facilitates therapeutic experiences through the creation of a system that includes visual technologies, armchairs, patients, more than one therapist, and sometimes even an anthropologist.[27] Whatever works, if and when it does, seems to work because of what this setting generates, sometimes even regardless of the specific therapeutic technique employed.

In the pages of this book, the systemic setting of therapy is a quasi-theatrical space where patients and therapists alike act out and externalize affective and psychic processes that are central to the constitution of both the individual and the couple. In the four chapters of this book, I focus on identification (chapter 1), affective transmission (chapter 2), and compulsive repetition (chapter 3); acting out my own psycho-imagistic processes, I then turn to hypnotic experience (chapter 4).

Throughout these chapters, I suggest that these psychic processes—identification, affective transmission, compulsive repetition, and hypnosis—are the pulsing beat of relational loops. These processes are not, however, intrinsically good or bad—*they are just what happens when something that has nothing to do with you turns you into you.*

. . .

Paula looks straight into the camera. "Do you see? *Do you see?*"

"I said the relationship!" Thiago screams at the camera.

. . .

Due to the insistent presence of screens and visual devices that were connecting me to, and separating me from, the subjects and objects of my research, *Into the Loop* develops a *refractive anthropology*, one that is always already mediated by visual devices that transform, bend, and distort whatever comes into view through the rectangular space of the screen.[28]

. . .

In the years following my fieldwork, while teaching psychological anthropology courses to undergrads, I came to realize that the questions provoked by systemic couple therapy—questions of screens and mediations, loops and affective attachments—were, in a different way, defining the psychic life of an entire generation of college students. Hearing me rant about compulsive loops and one-way mirrors, they intuitively understood that I was also talking about another kind of one-way mirror: the flickering rectangle we carry everywhere in our pockets.

After I finished writing my dissertation, I thus realized that my research on the compulsive loops haunting the romantic dyad could offer insights on the user-screen dyad too. This is why *Into the Loop* keeps turning to the question of digital media and our compulsive returns to them—my students made me. The user's relationship with screens would, eventually, become the subject of my next research project; in this book I address it only laterally.[29] In a sense, however, the whole book could also be understood as an attempt to ask what screenified loops can do to, and for, our affective life.

. . .

You keep returning to your objects of attachment to sustain a loop that sustains you.

. . .

A caveat for the anthropology police: *Into the Loop* is not a book about Argentina, nor about systemic therapy. Without dismissing them, the book drifts aside from historicist and culturalist critique as the dominant mode of anthropological knowledge.[30] Maybe it also drifts away from critique altogether, but I am not sure. This is a book *from* Argentina and *from* the systemic model, a book that privileges thinking-with over thinking-against.[31]

. . .

Yes, but what's this book actually about? Frantically searching for an answer, I could end up babbling something like this: We get folded into the repetition of affective loops because they hold for us a set of identificatory ties that would imply our own dissolution if we let them go (chapters 1–3). Within a dyadic loop, we can end up identifying with our partner's projections (chapter 1), as well as becoming their go-to affective dump (chapter 2). In the contemporary condition, we are hypnotized by a very restricted range of affective attachments (chapters 3, 4). Our affective ties can drain as much as awaken our

vitality (chapters 1–4). Whatever cosmology you are plugged into, ritually repeated returns make you available to be possessed by the affective forces of that cosmology (chapter 3).

Repeated returns can hypnotize you into a looping immobility or make you available to be possessed by the forces moving across the nervous system of a different cosmology; This process might displace whatever it is you have identified as *you* (chapters 3, 4).

Drifting aside from relational loops is fun, scary, and sometimes necessary (chapters 1–4).

Oh, yes, then there is that claim about projective identification and cannibalism (chapter 1), and the one about hypnosis and image work (chapter 4), and the one about the death drive and decompositional transformation (chapter 3), and the one about opening the windows (chapter 2); it's going to be a fun and loopy ride, I promise.

. . .

A crisis is a crisis in the reproduction of something.[32]

. . .

Into the Loop is not about a teleological and liberatory stepping out of the loop, but rather about a playful dance between liberation and capture.[33] The liberation phenomenology of the book, if there is one, lies in an oscillatory movement between the loops we are trapped within, the loops we move away from, the loops we choose, the loops we don't.

Notes

1. This book's ethnographic materials were observed and recorded in Spanish. I have transcribed all my recordings directly from Spanish to English and modified spoken sentences to make them more readable to the English reader while retaining the meaning and tone of the speaker's words. I leave in brackets words that didn't find a happy translation. This project received Ethics Approval from UC Berkeley. All patients agreed to be observed and recorded during their therapy sessions.

2. Adapted from the *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

3. For a cosmic anthropology of systems and system theory, see Olson, *Into the Extreme*. On cybernetics, see Wiener, *Cybernetics*; for an intellectual and scientific history of the cybernetic era, see Heims, *The Cybernetics Group*; on the historical relationship between cybernetics and systemic family therapy, see Weinstein, *The Pathological Family*.

4. Weinstein, *The Pathological Family*, 6. Weinstein explores how in postwar America the family turned into a visual and performative object of study as well as a therapeutic site of intervention. In addition to systemic therapy, see, for example, the use of one-way mirrors in the Strange Situation Procedure experiment that grounds attachment theory (as in Ainsworth et al., *Patterns of Attachment*). I further discuss the Strange Situation Procedure in chapter 3.

5. The famous essay by Gregory Bateson, Don Jackson, and Jay Haley on the role of the "double bind" in schizophrenic symptom formation well represents how cybernetic theories of communication participated in the development of systemic therapy (see Bateson et al., "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia"). The Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California, played a crucial role in the development of systemic therapy. More widely, the systemic model has played a particularly important role in the fields of family and couple therapy (see Weinstein, *The Pathological Family*).

6. See Bateson, "The Cybernetics of 'Self.'" Clifford Geertz has famously described the Western conception of the person—as "a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and

action"—as "a rather peculiar idea within the context of world's cultures" ("From the Native's Point of View," 59).

7. Bateson, "The Cybernetics of 'Self,'" 331.

8. I am here resonating with the work of my dear friend and colleague Eduardo Kohn, who writes about the eco-logical "we" that emerges from whatever "I" we think we are (see Kohn, "Forest Forms and Ethical Life").

9. Bateson, "The Cybernetics of 'Self,'" 319.

10. Bateson even proposes to rethink the alcoholic's returns to the bottle as a surrender to a force that actually affords a more "correct" experience of a loop that exceeds the self ("The Cybernetics of 'Self,'" 313). I am here forcing a bit Bateson's own perspective considering his critical take on the very notion of "force" in favor of the notions of "difference" and "information" (see Bateson, "Pathologies of Epistemology").

11. In Collu, "#Zoombies," I write about an anthropology beneath, beyond, and despite the human, borrowing from Eduardo Kohn's anthropology beyond the human (see Kohn, *How Forests Think*).

12. For a recent exploration of cybernetics and behavioral loops, see, for example, Resch and Parzer, "Cybernetics and Behavioral Loops."

13. I am here thinking, among others, about Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*; Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*; Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, *The Hundreds*; Susan Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things*; Lisa Stevenson, *Life Beside Itself*; Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*; Michael Taussig, *The Mastery of Non-Mastery*; Robert Desjarlais, *The Blind Man*. See also Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean's collection of experimental and literary anthropological writings, *Crumpled Paper Boat*. Before writing, I keep my typing fingers nourished with the poetic voices of authors like Valeria Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*; Emily Ogden, *On Not Knowing*; Mary Ruefle, *Madness, Rack, and Honey*; Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights*; and Joyelle McSweeney, *Death Styles*, among others.

14. This section animates a slightly different two hundred words cowritten with Eric Taggart. See Collu and Taggart, "Rest So Deep Now."

15. I am here thinking about Lisa Stevenson, who, after reading a draft of this manuscript, said, "Yes, but . . . is a loop a loop a loop?"

16. According to the World Health Organization, between 2015 and 2017 in Argentina there were about 226 psychologists for every 100,000 inhabitants. As a point of comparison, in the United States there were 30 psychologists per 100,000. Numbers are even higher in Buenos Aires, where there seem to be 1,572 psychotherapists for every 100,000 inhabitants. I take this information from Marsilli-Vargas's recent book on psychoanalytic genres of listening in Buenos Aires (*Genres of Listening*, 109).

17. The anthropologist Sergio Visacovsky writes about psychoanalysis in Argentina as a national "secular theodicy" often mobilized to understand individual and collective distress ("La constitución de un sentido práctico"). During Argentina's 2000–2001 economic crisis, for example, psychoanalysts were part of a public conversation, one that asked whether psychoanalysis could address the causes and consequences of the national economic crisis (see Plotkin and Visacovsky, "Los psicoanalistas y la crisis"). In "Armed Against Unhappiness," the anthropologist Sean Brotherton writes about psychoanalysis as a cultural "grammar."

18. See Plotkin (*Freud in the Pampas*; *Argentina on the Couch*). See also Dagfal, *Entre Paris y Buenos Aires*, on the impact of French psychoanalysis on Argentina; and Vezzetti, *Aventuras de Freud en el país de los argentinos*, on the history of psychoanalysis in Argentina. For an ethnography of Argentinean psychotherapeutic culture in Buenos Aires's marginalized areas, see María Epele's work ("Psychotherapy, Psychoanalysis and Urban Poverty in Argentina"; "Breaking Down"). See also Mariano Plotkin and Nicolás Viotti's exploration of the heterogeneous entanglement between secular and religious therapeutic practices in Buenos Aires ("Between Freud and Umbanda"). Psychotherapy is extensively present in Argentinean TV shows, reality TV, and movies. I am thinking, for example, among many others, about *Historias de Diván* (Juan José Jusid), a 2013 TV show based on the homonymous book by the Argentinean psychoanalyst Gabriel Rolón, who played an important role in bridging psychoanalysis with self-help culture (see Papalini, "Recetas para sobrevivir a las exigencias del neocapitalismo"). See also *Vulnerables* (dir. Daniel Barone and Adrián Suar), a 1999–2000 TV series on group therapy, or the 2012–14 Argentinean adaptation of the Israeli TV show *BeTipul* (dir. Ori Sivan) titled *En Terapia* (dir. Alejandro Maci).

19. As Plotkin points out in *Argentina on the Couch*, twelve years after the restoration of democracy in Argentina, Army Chief of Staff General Balsa made a public appearance on television and spoke about the past military dictatorship in terms of the nation's "unconscious traumas" (1).

20. I didn't convince him, not even a little bit.

21. On the role of family therapy and social psychology in Argentina see Macchioli, "Inicios de la terapia familiar en la Argentina."

22. See Vezzetti, "From the Psychiatric Hospital to the Street." As Vezzetti writes, "Although it is impossible to evaluate the real impact of this intervention on the life of the city, the experience reflected a shift from the private therapeutic to a public and popular psychoanalysis conceived and practiced directly over society" (141).

23. I am thinking here about the front page of an issue of the *Revista Ñ* I saw during fieldwork in 2013, which had the title "El psicoanálisis saca el diván a la calle" [Psychoanalysis takes the couch to the street]—the cover had a drawing of Freud and Lacan walking with a (psychoanalytic) couch in the street (with an ambulance in the background).

24. See Marsilli-Vargas, *Genres of Listening*, on multifamily structured psychoanalytic treatment.

25. The process of observing the observers and focusing on their therapeutic impact is part of what has been called second-order cybernetics in family therapy. See, for example, Smith and Karam, "Second-Order Cybernetics in Family Systems Theory."

26. I am here thinking about, and resonating with, recent works that explore the entanglement between media and psychotherapy. In particular, Hannah Zeavin's *The Distance Cure* shows how communication technologies—from letters to radio to the phone to algorithmic auto-intimacy—are, in fact, an integral part of the fantasies, promises, and accomplishment of different psychotherapeutic models. See also Jeremy Greene's *The Doctor Who Wasn't There* for a historical analysis of the relationship between communication technologies and mediated clinical encounters. More specifically, on the mediati-

zation of psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires, see Marsilli-Vargas, "The Offline and Online Mediatization of Psychoanalysis."

27. This seems different from therapy sessions filmed with the idea of making them as real as possible by hiding the presence of video cameras. I am thinking, for example, about the recent TV show *Couples Therapy* (Eli Despres, , Josh Kriegman, Elyse Steinberg)—see Schwartz, "The Therapist Remaking Our Love Lives on TV."

28. On refraction and anthropology, see Collu, "Refracting Affects."

29. See Collu, "#Zoombies"; Collu and Stillinger, "Like Buzzing in My Brain."

30. The therapeutic spaces and scenes I describe in the book might at times feel cut off or severed from Argentina's cultural and historical context, especially for an anthropological readership. This an intentional cut, and it's the result of an ambivalent relationship I have with the central role that context and culture need to play in anthropological descriptions and analysis. On the one hand, the refractive anthropology of the book tries to perform the phenomenological experience of "getting caught" (Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words*) in, or by, the rectangularized cuts of the screen when watching live therapy through all kinds of visual devices—cultural context thus flickers throughout the text as a mediatic, and refracted, absent presence. On the other hand, there are also other layers of reasoning behind my decision not to foreground cultural context as a main explanatory principle. One of them is related to a *vibe*, for lack of a better term, I got from Argentinean anthropologists, sociologists, and historians I met when I was in Buenos Aires. These academics consistently manifested a bitter distaste for ethnographers who, like me, would come from North American academies, spend short periods of time in Argentina, and then write books "about Argentina" based on relatively narrow sets of ethnographic materials. Most of these works, according to the academics I talked to, seemed characterized by a hermeneutic and ethnographic disconnect between what North American authors would write and the Argentinean life-world. An Argentinean sociologist once took me aside after a workshop to tell me how *not* to write my dissertation: "Most people come here from [North] American academia just to find what they already wanted to find when they wrote their grant applications." But even before beginning my research in Buenos Aires, a specific moment with a close friend from Cordoba shaped my overall hermeneutic mood on this matter. A couple of days after I landed in Argentina to start my research, I was telling my friend something about my research project while we were both walking back home at the crack of dawn after a night of *fernet con coca*. My friend suddenly turned to me and with the calm lucidity of a mother telling her son to tighten his scarf, she said, "Samuele, *no somos tus Indios* [we are not your Indians]." This friend of mine was referring to an explicitly colonial way in which North American researchers tend to objectify the Argentinean (and, more broadly, Latin American) context. These interactions, among other things, reinforced my desire to try to write not *about* Argentina but *from* Argentina, in ways that hopefully will still capture a local genre of experience, however laterally and refractedly.

31. I am thinking with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "reparative" approach (in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading"), as well as Kathleen Stewart's call to move away from "critique" understood as the academic habit "of snapping at the world as if the whole point of being and thinking is just to catch it in a lie" ("In the World That Affect Proposed," 196).

32. Berlant, "The Unfinished Business of Cruel Optimism."

33. I am borrowing Deleuze's expression about a "double movement of liberation and capture," which he uses in a different context in a book about Bergson, cinema, and the "time-image" (Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 68).

CHAPTER 1. SEEING YOURSELF BEING SEEN

1. For a recent use of "seeing oneself seeing oneself," see Song, "Seeing Oneself Seeing Oneself." See also Lacan who, echoing Paul Valéry, writes, "I saw myself seeing myself" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 80); or Merleau-Ponty's use in *The Visible and the Invisible* of a similar expression, "touching myself touching" (9).

2. "The value of permanent recording of therapeutic experience in motion pictures is self-evident," writes Nathan Ackerman, a pioneering figure of systemic therapy, in *Treating the Troubled Family*, ix. Video recording was, in his view, "the only known method to date that provides a satisfactory permanent record of a Gestalt, a merging of the image of face, voice, emotion, and bodily expression" (ix). The development of "second-order cybernetics" and narrative approaches in systemic family therapy has complicated Ackerman's perspective through a constructionist understanding of visual technologies (see, for example, Anderson and Goolishian, "The Client Is the Expert"; Hoffman, "A Constructivist Position for Family Therapy"). For a detailed history of systemic family therapy, see Weinstein, *The Pathological Family*. See also Madanes, *Behind the One-Way Mirror*, on the benefits of being able to see families through the one-way mirror.

3. Let's call the TV show you are binging *Desperate Black Mirrors*. With your neck strained toward the screen and your upper back arched like a champion, there you are, eagerly savoring the show without actually perceiving the screen that is showing you the show. Also, spoiler alert: At the end of the *Desperate Black Mirrors* season finale, we will discover that N. is not dead, but her spirit is trapped inside a digital house of mirrors. On this topic, see what Bolter and Grusin write on transparent immediacy in *Remediation* (23–24).

4. And a nice allegory for the play of identifications haunting the ethnographer's relation with their field.

5. This might be why this type of mirror is also occasionally called a two-way mirror.

6. Merleau-Ponty thus writes that to see is to "have at distance," to experience a split between the viewer and what is seen ("Eye and Mind," 357). The development of perspective in the Renaissance well represents the mobilization of these objectivist features of vision (see Arasse, *Histoires de peintures*; Carbone, "Lo schermo, la tela, la finestra").

7. Because of its relationship with objectivist science and Western modernity, the centrality of vision has been deeply criticized for its complicity with colonial apparatuses of capture. See, for example, Howes, *Empire of the Senses*; Brennan and Jay, *Vision in Context*; Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*; Jay, *Downcast Eyes*; and Levin, *Sites of Vision*. This model of vision, as Michel de Certeau writes in "La folie de la vision," implies the "exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive" where "the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more" (92). Donna Haraway has sharply described in "Situated Knowledges" how this type of vision reproduces objectivist male-centric scien-