

***Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth:  
Psychoanalytic Truth, the Post-Truth Era,  
and History as a Series of Psychoanalytic Sessions***

Nathan Fleshner

**Malvina Reynolds and the Bold Claim to Truth**

*Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* (Columbia Records 1967) is an odd title for a music album. Albums whose tracks are linked by concept more often involve themes such as singing the hits or accessible, easy listening favourites. They are organised around a particular musical corpus rather than a philosophical idea. While the album's title seems very clear and direct at first glance, any claim to singing *the* truth is a bold claim and, in 1967 and present-day alike, more complicated than one might initially perceive. The title's claim first asserts that what is being sung is indeed true. The claim also asserts that what is sung has a singular claim to the only truth, a notion whose very existence as a singularity has been long debated in philosophical circles. Perhaps with good reason, Reynolds was not fond of this title, which was ascribed by a producer at Columbia Records and not by Reynolds herself (Schimmel, Email Correspondence). But the title reflects an important aspect of the album. It implies that there was, at that time, a particular attack on the truth and that there was a need to record the truth for future use. Like much of the music of that era, the album stands as a historical record of cultural and societal circumstances present in the late 1960s, and its declarative presentation of stories and commentary on current events are likely what led producers toward the title. As such, Reynolds's album goes one step further than other albums of that era. Its title explicitly presents its contents as truth.

Recent societal upheavals in the U.S. and abroad have returned our focus to many of society's troubles in the 1960s, problems that remain largely unsolved today despite sometimes overconfident notions of progress made over the last 60 years. As such, these different eras in our history appear as a progression of perspectives on recurring psychoanalytic issues with which our society seems to continue to grapple. Reinforcing its current relevancy, *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* retains an aural presence in modern-day as the song "Little Boxes" was used as the theme for the sitcom *Weeds* (Kohan). As such, it bridges the gap of applicability to the present day in both aural and topical realms. This article stresses the analytic process and journey that occur in a society's longitudinal search for truth as it grapples with various conflicts and pathologies both latent and consciously manifested across its historical development. Such issues are explored in *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* and are demonstrated as still manifesting in present-day society. The article closes with an exploration of this psychoanalytic process, aligning the album with literary narratives as a necessary and essential component of healing from cultural trauma.

The 2016 and 2020 U.S. Presidential Elections and the insurrection on the U.S. capital that followed in January 2021 were traumatic experiences for many Americans. The trauma was not a result of a political win or loss, depending on your ideological perspective. Rather, for myself and for many, it was the instantaneous disruption of trust in my friends, family, and neighbors. While the election of Donald Trump was traumatic, it was a symptom of a greater pathology rather than a pathology in and of itself. Instead, the trauma resulted from the revelation that, for much of the U.S., Trump's approach to ethics, morals, and the value of others — or a lack thereof — was declared acceptable and even openly embraced by a large portion of the country. Likewise, this may be where the true trauma originated, it disrupted my trust in my ability to evaluate the nature

and intentions of those around me accurately. This trauma caused intense introspection, an introspection that remains today. Likewise, the trauma itself — both for me and society — has continued. The social unrest that reflects both the open disregard for the equal value and respect of human beings and the open disregard for the value and respect of our planet has solidified and reinforced a continuation of the acceptance and empowerment of that same ethos. While the 2020 election may have initiated a reckoning with and path toward healing reconciliation, the need to address our socio-cultural pathologies remains as they will hardly disappear with a mere turn of leadership. A latent sociological pathology has revealed itself to our social consciousness. Across virtually every discipline, this traumatic experience reinvigorated an exploration of social, cultural, and racial issues. These issues are the filter through which I explore *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth*.

In an attempt to address these sociological pathologies, this article looks at two aspects of *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth*: 1) the historical context of the album itself and how the album portrays its truth about that history, and 2) the psychoanalytic process of finding the truth. In doing so, it looks at historical time points as a longitudinal series of analytic sessions in which society, as a psychoanalytic patient itself, reveals different versions of the same latent cultural pathologies. It demonstrates *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* as a snapshot of a single psychoanalytic session for society in the late 1960s. It concludes that music, popular music, in particular, seems to have progressed toward more truth-telling and direct engagement with traumatic historical and cultural experiences. Songs as truth-seeking, historical, and narrative records are certainly not new, but their acceptance in popular circles has increased, pointing toward more potential for society to grapple with some of these psychoanalytic issues.

### **1967 and Music as a Psychoanalytic Link between Past and Present**

*Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* was released in 1967, a year squarely centered in an era of considerable sociological and political turmoil, much like the present day, and many of these recurring issues are recorded on the album. Both musically and lyrically, the album's style fits squarely within the tradition of the American Folk Music Revival (Lund and Denisoff 1971, and Eyerman and Barretta 1996). 1967 was a significant year in U.S. history. Dubbed the "Summer of Love," the summer of 1967 found U.S. youth coming together for music, sex, and drugs, but more importantly, coming together for an escape from and opposition to dire circumstances of social unrest, including the Vietnam War and the civil rights conflicts that abounded in the 1960s. In fact, the topics at the forefront of intellectual and broader societal thought in the 1960s are some of the very same topics we wrestle with today. Notable events and publications from the album's era include Douglas Hofstadter's 1964 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*; the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, 1964, and 1968; the Voting Rights Act of 1965; the assassinations of Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968; and, of course, the Vietnam War.

Versions of these and other societal issues remain in the present day, demonstrating recurring societal trauma, and each is present in *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth*. Anti-intellectual disdain for experts and critical thinkers has reappeared as documented in Susan Jacoby's *The Age of American Unreason* (2008), Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals* (2000), Tom Nichols's pre-Trump-era essay, "The Death of Expertise" (2014), and David Masciotra's "Anti-Intellectualism is Back" (2020), which reprised Hofstadter's work in reference to attacks on Dr. Anthony Fauci and the development of COVID-19 vaccines in the U.S. Climate change is a current critical topic, but has an important history in the album's 1967. A 2015 poll was conducted by *The Carbon Brief*, in which members of the last Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change chose an article by Manabe and Wetherald (1967), written in the *Journal of Atmospheric Sciences*

from the same year as Reynolds's album, as the most influential paper on climate change research and the first to demonstrate the effects of carbon dioxide on global temperatures through a computer model (Pidock 2015). The album also covers topics clearly relevant in 1967 as in the present day, including civil rights, racial inequality, broader social inequalities, and religious fundamentalism.

Reynolds's album goes beyond mere observations of these truths, as its music provides an analytic commentary on these societal issues present in the lyrics. Likewise, psychoanalysis moves beyond uncovering latent truths, also requiring the interpretation and application of those latent truths to a person's conscious life. In considering psychoanalysis and music, it is worth noting that Freud described himself as very unmusical [*ganz musikalish*] (Reitman 2018, 375). He provided analyses of art and artist in *Leonardo da Vinci and A Memory of His Childhood* (1910) and *The Moses of Michaelangelo* (1914) but avoided venturing into analyses of music or musicians. Other psychoanalysts have, however, addressed music as a psychoanalytic topic. Noted collections include Feder, et al.'s *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Music* (1990/1993) and Wilson's *Music-Psychoanalysis-Musicology* (2018). Important for this study, Leo notes that "from the 1950s onwards...rock music and psychoanalysis focused especially on the crucial struggles against racism, war, authoritarianism, but also intergenerational conflicts and traumas" (Leo 16-17). Leo cites Mancia's idea that music as a language can express symbolic [meaning], with the function of representing our feelings and thus our emotional life" (26). Schwarz describes music's ability to cross a "sonorous fantasy space" ( 9), consciously manifesting latent unconscious material. Like Leo and Mancia's feelings and emotions, Schwarz sees "music as a fantasy thing that recalls an experience that cannot be remembered transparently" (Schwarz 166, n. 6).

Looking at the psychoanalytic potential of music in a similar manner, Theodor Reik observes, "Human speech denotes the material reality; music is the language of psychic reality. ...Music is the universal language of human emotion, the expression of the inexpressible" (8). In combination with language, this is where music gains its psychoanalytic significance. "...[I]n the language of poetry not much of the secret life of emotions comes across. Music, so poor in definite and definable objective and rational contents, can convey the infinite variety of primitive and subtle emotions" (9). Reik finds that music can convey a truer picture of the latent content revealed in verbal manifestations from one's unconscious (8-10, 41-44). Reik observes music's ability to trigger emotions and associations from the past, including painting latent material with mockery and defiance (68) and nostalgia (105-118) that are still applicable to present circumstances. Reik notes nostalgia's catalysts of discomfort and intense feelings of connection with the past (118). Reynolds's truth album can serve a similar function of discomfort or perhaps connect with a societal discomfort already present and provides exactly the kind of connection with the past noted by Reik. It triggers something from the past at a societal level, reminding us that there is something unconscious still present in society's psyche that needs to be addressed. The album serves as a vessel or link to that unconscious, latent content as recorded in 1967, ready to be applied in the present day as society grapples with similar pathologies. This paper looks at two examples that provide a satirical interpretation of their topics, "Little Boxes" on middle-class housing and societal conformity and "The Battle of Maxton Field" on racism, and one example, "God Bless the Grass," which ties its topic to the album's larger message of recorded truth.

Satire is an important psychoanalytic device for the revelation of latent content. Drawing from Freud's work, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Daniel Sabbath provides a musical parallel. "Like the joke, music is a socially accepted procedure whereby adults derive pleasure from sound analogies that lack verbal meaning" (Sabbath 54). Sabbath's example lacks the lyrics of Reynolds's songs, which reintroduce the possibility for verbal meaning. The truth in Reynolds's satirical songs lies in their musical setting as much as in the lyrics as Sabbath's "sound

analogies that lack verbal meaning” themselves, but the music combines with the lyrics to create powerful revelations of the truth inherent in those lyrics, a truth less salient without their musical setting.

“Little Boxes” is an excellent example of Reynolds’ cutting satire and wit. The song’s repetition, both with its harmonic structure and repetitive waltz-like rhythmic pattern, lulls the listener into the sing-songy mindset of a nursery rhyme. The song pontificates about people completing their university educations cut into the same prescribed mold. This is framed with wit and humour, however, at the end of each melodic phrase, where “come out all the same” is growled out at the bottom of Reynolds’s vocal register. A distinct snicker can be heard at the end of several of these cadences, like a vocalized smile. Earning a Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1938 (Schimmel, “Malvina Reynolds”), Reynolds is, of course, not opposed to going to a university. Her commentary is on the anti-intellectual product of going to a university merely for practice rather than for intellectual rigor and its resultant filters such as logic, discernment, and fairness. These filters are required for processing data in the post-truth era as much as 1967. While she calls out specific professions, one could insert any profession in this list of university foci. The world, of course, needs professions that require advanced degrees, and many in these professions afford the kind of change critical to human and societal advancement and refinement. But the idea of “coming out all the same” speaks to going through the motions while in school, breeding an intellectual stasis that can certainly hinder the critical spirit required to fight the suppression of both people and ideas. The song’s lyrics, as well as the musical repetitions, make a strong, satirical statement on the dangers of this sociological rut of cyclically going through the intellectual motions.

With a different shade of wit, “The Battle of Maxton Field” is a poignant ballad about racism. It tells the story of a violence-inducing KKK rally that the Lumbee Indians disrupted in 1958 (North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources 2019). Each verse tells a portion of the story and ends with a punchline. The music sets this serious topic in a farcical and mocking manner. The melody highlights the punchline of each verse through a descending scale that ranges a full octave. The upbeat nature of the song invokes energy and fun, not solemnity and seriousness. The song is cast in a major key, a satirical choice considering its narrative of racial violence. The bass arpeggiates back and forth between the root and fifth of the chord and sometimes walks up step-wise between chord roots, a style very common in country music and often used to create a spirited atmosphere. Other songs from this era share this form and spirit. Johnny Cash was famous for his wit and snark, exhibited in several songs just after the release of *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth*: “Cocaine Blues” from the album *At Folsom Prison* (1968) and “A Boy Named Sue” from *At San Quentin* (1969). These songs share the wit-driven form in the verses of three lines and a punchline and the upbeat walking bass line with a strummed chord on the off beats. On *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth*, “The Battle of Maxton Field” is the only song with these characteristics. One can imagine Reynolds singing this song and, when she sang each punchline, inducing the same kinds of cheers of affirmation heard from Johnny Cash’s prison audiences.

Cash occasionally interacted with Reynolds’s folk music circles and also frequently addressed injustices to Native Americans. Cash appeared on Pete Seeger’s *Rainbow Quest* to promote his 1964 album, *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian* (Seeger 1966). Reynolds also appeared on an episode of this program (Seeger 1965). Like Reynolds, Cash’s *Bitter Tears* provides critical commentaries on these records of historical truth, but they are strikingly serious in nature. For example, “As Long As the Grass Shall Grow” records a treaty between George Washington and the Senecas of the Iroquoit Nation, establishing an area at the border of New York and Pennsylvania as Indian land. The song accounts for the violation of that treaty via a dam

on the Alleghany River that “will flood the Indian country” and “drown the Indian graveyard.” Reynolds’s wit and Cash’s whimsical style are absent from Cash’s *Bitter Tears* ballads. Reynolds’s “The Battle of Maxton Field” is unique in this tradition. It combines the serious topic of Cash’s *Bitter Tears* ballads with the mockery and whimsy present in Cash’s “Cocaine Blues” and “A Boy Named Sue.” In a manner not present in Cash’s *Bitter Tears*, Reynolds’s lyrics and music openly mock the fear, insecurity, and racism present in the Klan’s activities at Maxton Field.

Perhaps the album’s most direct reference to the idea of truth, “God Bless the Grass,” addresses climate change through mankind’s interference with nature. It describes the incredible ability of grass to grow in unexpected circumstances, namely through cracks in the concrete. It presents the earth, like a repressed drive, as restrained against its will by man-made structures. Despite the perceived strength of the concrete, the grass finds a way to emerge into the sun that is necessary for its survival. It notes that the grass is alive, but the stone is not. The second verse equates this fight for life to the drive within truth and truth’s ability to break through its suppression. The final verse juxtaposes the symbols of grass and truth, noting the deep roots and strong will of both to grow. The musical style here is gently strummed chords that follow the melody on strong beats. The tempo is rubato allowing the melody and its lyrics to be prayer-like, almost as if Reynolds is improvising, or even freely associating, the prayer as thoughts come to mind. In contrast with the upbeat and bright fun-poking of “The Battle of Maxton Field,” the rubato and minor key of “God Bless the Grass” interact to create a more introspective spirit, an introspection that invites a psychoanalytic notion that Reynolds is thinking of grass, but what is being projected from her unconscious is a latent thought about the truth. As such, “God Bless the Grass” presents the philosophical foundation that governs the album.

These songs represent a historical record of the late 1960s and Reynolds’s interpretation of specific memories and observations. In the introspective self-analysis that happens during traumatic times, the album also serves as a present-day mirror in which we can see society’s progress across a historical narrative. As a recorded interpretation of cultural pathologies from a single psychoanalytic session in 1967, it creates a reference point, a litmus test against which we can compare progress with the cultural psyche of the present day. When one observes similar pathologies still present today, it is easy to question whether any progress has been made. With the regular onslaught of news stories — racially-motivated murders, dismissals of science, active political reinforcing of inequalities, and much more — we find ourselves asking, “What happened?” much as we did in 2016, early 2021, and many instances in between. It turns out this same self-psychoanalytic sentiment was present in 1967 and that the introspection and effort toward the preservation of historical truth reflected in *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* was equally found in literature.

In 1967, *The Partisan Review* published a collection of essays, “What’s Happening in America?” authored by noted intellectuals, including among many others, Martin Duberman, Michael Harrington, Tom Hayden, and Susan Sontag, which addressed the “good deal of anxiety about the direction of American life.” In a similar vein, at the end of 1967, noted author E.B. White published an op-ed, “An Act of Intellect to Turn the Year,” in *The New York Times*. White observed that “the Republic slides downhill at an alarming rate” and pondered the following:

At this year’s end I think everyone is asking: “What happened? What went sour? What did I do wrong? Who’s to blame?” I don’t pretend to know what happened, but something did: and to the last question there can be only one answer: “I am. I am to blame” (White 22).

White continued, expanding on his intellectual responsibility for societal circumstances and the guilt that can arise from such introspection. “I feel personally responsible for 1967, and I hope a couple of hundred million other Americans feel the same way” (White 22). He challenged his fellow citizens to join him in an effort to right the ship. “There is always a chance, in the next lump of time, to correct our mistakes, mend our ways, and reshape our destiny” (White 22). White’s introspection is significant as it is congruent with the introspection that many, myself included, felt in 2016 and have continued feeling over the past four years.

### **Music Analysis and the Psychoanalytic Quest for Truth**

Society finds itself searching for solutions to these recurrent sociological pathologies in the present day as in the 1960s. In doing so, truths often seem hidden both within sociological phenomena and within our individual psyches as we interact with these phenomena. Much as they are in our minds, historical narratives are often presented by different societal constructs in softened or distorted ways. Music albums, like their literary counterparts, can serve as loci of historical truth and commentaries on that truth from which we might glean clearer perspectives recorded closer in time to those historical phenomena, learn from past mistakes, and heal from traumatic experiences. Such a search for historical and psychoanalytic truth in society and their representations in *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* uncovers parallels between the processes of music analysis and psychoanalysis. In locating the album within a sociological psychoanalytic context, the idea of a psychoanalytic search for truth rises to the surface in a prominent role. Indeed, Reynolds herself is performing an interpretative, psychoanalytic act on the album’s revealed truth. As such, the album serves as part of an ongoing series of psychoanalytic sessions on a societal level.

As witnessed by the long history of discussion in the philosophical literature, the truth can be a difficult concept; perhaps, more difficult than it needs to be. As Katz observes in the 2016 issue of *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* dedicated to the topic of psychoanalytic truth, most psychoanalytic writing on the idea of truth also assumes a basic definition familiar to all and largely sidesteps any attempt to define it in any certain terms. In the issue’s summarizing essay, Katz observes that psychoanalysts have largely shifted from a search for the latent truth toward emphasising the thinking and self-analytic processes by which they seek that truth and how that truth is manifested in their own psychoanalytic work (Katz 508). This *process* of searching for truth frames *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* as a historical record useful for the societal psychoanalytic process currently underway, for it is the process of listening to music and reading literature through which we are able to gain context and healing during traumatic times. Katz references the notion of truth from “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” where Freud equates “the truth” with “the perception of reality” and posits that, when these inner truths are difficult or even painful, “the ego’s defence-mechanisms are condemned to falsify the inner perception so that it transmits to us only an imperfect and travestied picture of our id” (Freud 1937a, 392, quoted in Katz 2016, 503). This picture of wrestling with the truth within an individual is mirrored in society’s wrestling with the same topics today as in Reynolds’s 1967. Much like the individual, society, as a whole, often seems to land on “an imperfect and travestied picture” of painful current events to avoid the difficult truths that lie beneath them. However, it behooves society, to use Katz’s words below, to work past these imperfect pictures to come to know the painful truths that lie beneath the surface. Katz summarizes the different psychoanalytic perspectives on the truth within the issue, noting that

*things* exist in the patient’s mind and life that it behooves the patient to come to know, and that the patient’s *new or improved ability to know* those things is

entwined, to greater or lesser degree, with the *process of coming to know something* in the analytic engagement. Insofar as they construe these things to be known as *what is true*,...truth is not only “relevant” in psychoanalysis, but is indeed the often-elusive goal of our clinical travails — potentially dangerous yet necessary (Katz 509).

*Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* and similar musical and literary records of historical phenomena serve as such “things...in the patient’s mind and life that it behooves the patient to come to know,” enable the revelation of painful truths, and empower the post-traumatic healing process.

In regard to important phenomena buried within a piece of music, the process of music analysis, much like the analysis of literature, maintains a process toward seeking the truth, both in lyric and musical structures, that often closely mirrors the process of psychoanalysis. One notable difference is that we can hardly view a piece of music as having a pathological issue. Rather the pathology, perhaps, could be viewed as the disconnect that occurs between the musical object and the analyst’s own understanding of the piece. Perhaps the object in need of correction might be viewed as the transference between musical object and analyst. Making cross-disciplinary analogies can be a messy process, but music analysis and psychoanalysis share both the dialogic process that happens between music or patient and analyst as well as the interpretive process of creating an analysis, much like Freud describes in “Constructions in Analysis.” The analyst listens to what a piece of music has to say, creates an analytic construction based on what is revealed, and tests the truth of that construction against another listening to the music’s content. Much as Freud describes in “Constructions in Analysis,” the patient, the music in this analogy, communicates to the analyst a yes or no confirmation of the truth in each analytic construction (“Constructions in Analysis” 260-261). Like any scientific endeavor, the music analyst and psychoanalyst return to test the veracity of their analytic construction with the musical score or patient, respectively. As the music analyst makes observations about relationships hidden beneath and between different parts of the lyrics and score, the observations, like a patient’s free associations, contain fragments of the truth but are not in and of themselves necessarily true. The analyst’s task is to reassemble these fragments into an analytic construction. The patient then reacts to these constructions in a dialogic process that moves closer to the latent, unconscious material that contains the actual psychoanalytic truth. The material presented to the analyst is, of course, sent through the censor and, therefore, often not fully true, but it may contain a disguised form of the truth — the truth transformed before being revealed to the conscious. As Freud notes in “Constructions in Analysis,” “All of the essentials are preserved.... It depends only upon analytic technique whether we shall succeed in bringing what is concealed completely to light” (“Constructions in Analysis” 260). While the ideas of a censor and concealed content lying latent beneath the conscious surface might seem like odd constructs to apply to music or art, evidence can be found in the longevity of great music and art, that endure the test of time, continuously engaging listeners, performers, and analysts alike in the mysteries that lie latently beneath the musical surface and whose true form are revealed through years of analysis and performance alike. Much like psychoanalysis, the process of music analysis becomes an ongoing quest for the truth within the analytic object, and each time we, as individuals or as a society, engage in this dialogue with a historical artifact like *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth*, we reorient ourselves with truth and enable a healing process.

### **History as a Series of Cultural Psychoanalytic Sessions**

In the analytic case study of *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth*, the album is seen as a musical snapshot of a moment in time — a single psychoanalytic session in 1967, or perhaps better, a

record of a single analytic construction made in 1967 — and is viewed within a longitudinal series of psychoanalytic treatments where society might be seen as a psychoanalytic patient and perhaps history, herself, as the psychoanalyst. Sadly, ‘history repeats itself’ is less cliché than we would often like to admit. Rather, it is clear that society has difficulty learning from and not repeating many of its socio-cultural mistakes. In the present day, we have been devastated in the U.S. by the murders of George Floyd, Ahmad Arbury, Breonna Taylor, and many, many others. The world remains in a fight against climate change and against those who want to refute it via their own data, replete with confirmation bias that points toward economic interests. Religious extremism is still an active part of society. Anti-intellectualism is encountered every day in attacks on science and history, such as the fight to diminish the importance of vaccines in the fight against COVID-19 and attempted legislative restrictions on historical studies such as critical race theory. These detractors act as psychoanalytic censors, transforming and distorting the truth to society, just as Freud conceptualized. Such censors must be fought against as they hinder progress in a sociological psychoanalytic session to correct these cultural pathologies. But these civil rights violations and sociological issues are hardly a new phenomenon. While we now live in what many are calling the “Post-Truth Era” (McEntyre 2018), deceptions and repackaging of truth for political gain are hardly new. The U.S. government’s well-documented deception of the progress or lack thereof in the Vietnam War is but one obvious example from the late 1960s. The fact that we are still dealing with these kinds of issues today reflects Freud’s observation in “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” that the psychoanalytic work of addressing these pathologies is an ongoing process. Albums like *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* serve as important historical records against such societal censors that hinder society’s own psychoanalytic progress.

Freud himself posits some of the reasons we are still grappling with these issues, having made less progress than we might have initially thought.

We know that the first step towards attaining intellectual mastery of our environment is to discover generalizations, rules and laws which bring order into chaos. In doing this we simplify the world of phenomena; but we cannot avoid falsifying it, especially if we are dealing with processes of development and change. What we are concerned with is discerning a *qualitative* alteration, and as a rule in doing so we neglect, at any rate to begin with, a *quantitative* factor. In the real world, transitions and intermediate stages are far more common than sharply differentiated opposite states. In studying developments and changes we direct our attention solely to the outcome; we readily overlook the fact that such processes are usually more or less incomplete — that is to say, that they are in fact only partial alterations. A shrewd satirist of old Austria, Johann Nestroy, once said: ‘Every step forward is only half as big as it looks at first’ ” (“Analysis Terminable and Interminable” 228).

While it might seem odd to anthropomorphize culture and society, they do maintain many of the characteristics of a conscious, living creature, however metaphorical those characteristics may be. Societies and cultures are born, and they die. They interact with other societies and cultures. Societies evolve and develop both idiosyncratically and are influenced by their interactions. Societies and cultures that have passed are often preserved in modified forms within other societies and cultures with whom they have interacted and influenced. Surely, they also have latent unconscious drives that propel and guide that same evolution and development. Jung’s notion of a collective unconscious rises to the fore. Likewise, societies clearly develop pathologies that must be worked through for the collective betterment of the whole. There are clearly obstacles in place, however, that thwart any improvement in the progress of society’s psychical development. As Freud notes, “Instead of an enquiry into how a cure by analysis comes



about...the question should be asked of what are the obstacles that stand in the way of such a cure" ("Analysis Terminable and Interminable" 221). One of these obstacles surely is truth — or rather the open and purposeful thwarting, disfiguring, and reconstitution of the truth as some kind of post-truth entity like 'alternative facts' or 'fake news'. These resistances to truth act like censors to thwart any sociological progress and, I posit, are much of the reason these cultural pathologies remain.

### **The Psychoanalytic Task within *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth***

In works like *Civilization and Its Discontents* and "Constructions in Analysis," Freud himself provides the analogy to an anthropomorphized society as a patient in a psychoanalytic process. In this way, we can clearly see *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* as a psychoanalytic construction of the socio-cultural psyche's pathologies in 1967, pathological manifestations we are still working through today. In "Constructions in Analysis," Freud refers to the idea of "historical truth," noting that the patient's psychological truth is a historical truth within their own life as well as a larger cultural and sociological history ("Constructions in Analysis" 267-268). This also likely points toward some of the *why* behind my own and many others' traumatic experiences with recent historical circumstances and reinvigorated uprisings of many of the socio-cultural issues addressed in *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth*. As did E. B. White in 1967, we feel such sociological trauma as our own. Freud notes that there is an element of historical truth within these delusions that resist sociological change and that these delusions and resistances are initiated in the historical past.

The recognition of [the] kernel of truth [at the core of a patient's delusion] would afford common ground upon which the therapeutic work could develop. That work would consist in liberating the fragment of historical truth from its distortions and its attachments to the actual present day and in leading it back to the point in the past to which it belongs ("Constructions in Analysis" 268).

Later, he connects these delusions more closely to a historical past that might be seen as societal as well as personal. "If we consider mankind as a whole and substitute it for the single human individual, we discover that it too has developed delusions which are inaccessible to logical criticism and which contradict reality.... [These delusions] owe their power to the element of *historical truth* which they have brought up from the repression of the forgotten and primaeval past" ("Constructions in Analysis" 269).

Furthering the analogy to society in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud connects the development of an individual's psychic development to that of a city and, to a larger degree, that of an entire civilization. He provides a closer connection to the psychological development of society, inviting the psychoanalytic perspective proposed in this article.

At this point we cannot fail to be struck by the similarity between the process of civilization and the libidinal development of the individual. Other instincts...are induced to displace the conditions for their satisfaction, to lead them into other paths. In most cases this process coincides with that of the *sublimation* (of instinctual aims) with which we are familiar, but in some it can be differentiated from it. Sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 97).

Viewed in a longitudinal manner, quite like the individual's therapeutic process, society's pathologies seem to be something that must be dealt with over a long stretch of time. They appear to ebb and flow across the structure of society's psyche, moving from latent unconscious forms to often horrific manifestations in our dealings with one another and our planet.

Society then seems to either sublimate or censor these drives, both natural and pathological, which deflects our dealings with them or even subverts them back to an unconscious level of neglect. With manifestations of the same topical pathologies in 1967 and the present day, society seems to demonstrate the difficulty in dealing with the truth, just as would a psychoanalytic patient.

Despite these psychoanalytic perspectives on society's difficulty, E. B. White's question, "What happened?" remains. Historians, sociologists, and psychoanalysts will surely write many books addressing this question about the 2016 and 2020 elections and the Trump administration, just as they have for the late 1960s and the presidents of that era. For the purpose of this article, the question might be repackaged as why are we still dealing with these exact same issues? Why are we still struggling with the same socio-cultural truths? The answer may lie in how uncomfortable it is to address them. Notions of governmental coverups in the 1960s, such as the progress or lack thereof in the Vietnam War, are well documented. Likewise, post-truth-era phraseologies such as 'alternative facts' and 'fake news' serve to dispel the discomfort that the truth can sometimes invoke. Freud himself acknowledges this tendency to disguise the uncomfortable truth.

The psychical apparatus is intolerant of unpleasure; it has to fend it off at all costs, and if the perception of reality entails unpleasure, that perception — that is, the truth — must be sacrificed. Where external dangers are concerned, the individual can help himself for some time by flight and by avoiding the situation of danger, until he is strong enough later on to remove the threat by actively altering reality. But one cannot flee from oneself; flight is no help against internal dangers. And for that reason the defensive mechanisms of the ego are condemned to falsify one's internal perception and to give one only an imperfect and distorted picture of one's Id ("Analysis Terminable and Interminable" 237).

Such societal displeasure in working through difficult truths is well-documented in works like Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* (2018) and attacks from the economic interests that underpin many forms of energy production with negative environmental effects. One answer to the question, "what happened?" might be that these topics were uncomfortable, and we, as a society, have not yet fully addressed their truths, truths expounded in *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth*. The truths about these societal pathologies have been falsified or at least distorted to accommodate society's discomfort, resulting in their historical recurrence. Music and literature, as historical records, loom critical in the psychoanalytic healing process.

If we view society's development psychoanalytically, we might posit such a longitudinal study of history with individual records of historical moments serving as statements on the psychoanalytic truth at that time. In this light, *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* serves as a musical snapshot of a particular psychoanalytic construction. Her album details different sociological issues as present in 1967 as they are today. Its title points toward an important element in this sociological psychoanalytic process: the truth is still attainable. It lies beneath the surface of many alterations and transformations, much as the field of psychoanalysis demonstrates in the individual's psyche, as these sociological issues are brought into the cultural consciousness.

## **Conclusion**

More recently, philosophers and sociologists have pointed toward a similar type of social pathology associated with the quest for truth, or better, an absence of personal knowledge of that truth, much like that encountered in psychoanalysis. Sociologist Simon Blackburn notes that “if [current] ideas are inadequate or dangerous, then we need an immune system to protect us from them, and the only immunity would have to be conferred by better ideas” (quoted in Allison and Fonagy 276). It is not too far-reaching to see Blackburn’s “better ideas” as the truth. To rephrase his statement, the truth can serve as an immunity against the psychopathology of “inadequate or dangerous” ideas, more succinctly stated as lies. Music can serve as a vessel of truth and a buffer to society’s pathologies and some of its more dangerous ideologies. Albums like *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* provide historical snapshots that preserve the truth gleaned from a particular moment in time, much as other more recent examples outside the folk genre like Childish Gambino’s “This Is America” and Gary Clark Jr.’s “This Land,” both of which record a snapshot of U.S. social structures and politics in the present day. Such musical statements of truth could comprise a long list. Music has long been a vessel of the human expression of truth, an act of expression that has well-documented therapeutic qualities.

Like Blackburn, philosopher Harry Frankfurt alludes to a similar therapeutic quest for truth, highlighting a need for truth on both individual and societal levels. He follows Freud in acknowledging the discomfort ascribed to the process of addressing difficult truths, noting that many people tend to brush off difficult truths because they are “so frightening, or so discouraging and demoralizing” (Frankfurt 57). Rather than denying these truths or hiding behind false distortions of the truth that are more palatable to the conscious, Frankfurt advises that “it is nearly always more advantageous to *face* the facts with which we must deal than to remain ignorant of them. After all, hiding our eyes from reality will not cause any reduction of its dangers and threats; plus, our chances of dealing successfully with the hazards that it presents will surely be greater if we can bring ourselves to see things straight” (Frankfurt 58). Frankfurt also focuses on the truth-seeking process over the truth itself and advises dealing with our inner struggles as a path toward solving some of these socio-cultural pathologies. “In our efforts to conduct our lives successfully, however, a readiness to face disturbing facts about ourselves may be an even more critical asset than a competent understanding merely of what we are up against in the outside world” (Frankfurt 59). Frankfurt elevates the quest for truth as a path toward such reconciliation, positing that it centers our psychological compasses on the realities that concern the pathologies in which we find ourselves surrounded today as well as in 1967.

Without truth, either we have no opinion at all concerning how things are or our opinion is wrong. One way or the other, we do not know what kind of situation we are in. We don’t know what’s going on, either in the world around us or within ourselves. If we do have some relevant beliefs about these matters, they are mistaken; and false beliefs, naturally do not effectively help us to cope. Perhaps we may be, for a time, *blissfully* ignorant or *happily* deceived, and in those ways, despite all of the difficulties that endanger us, we may temporarily avoid being especially upset or disturbed. In the end, however, our ignorance and our false beliefs are likely just to make our circumstances worse. The problem with ignorance and error is, of course, that they leave us in the dark. Lacking the truths that we require, we have nothing to guide us about our own feckless speculations or fantasies and the importunate and unreliable advice of others (Frankfurt 59-60).

From a musical perspective, it is plausible that we might be more ready as a society to deal with some of these sociological pathologies than perhaps we were in 1967. Evidence for such a claim lies in the popularity of such truth-laden musical examples. Pete Seeger’s rendition of Reynolds’s

“Little Boxes” merely reached number 70 on the Billboard Top 100 chart (Billboard 1964). More recently, songs such as Lady Gaga’s “Born this Way” (Billboard 2011), which addressed LGBTQIA+ and racial equality, and Childish Gambino’s “This Is America” (Billboard 2018), which addressed racial inequality, gun violence, and police brutality, both debuted at number 1 on the Billboard Top 100 chart. Perhaps, the popularity of such songs reflects an advancement in society’s psychoanalytic quest for truth.

Psychoanalysts Allison and Fonagy align closely with Frankfurt as they “suggest that, while the *experience* of knowing and having the truth about oneself known in the context of therapy is a necessary first step in bringing down this barrier, it should not be viewed as an end in itself, but rather as the establishment of a stance that can drive learning about one’s world” (Allison and Fonagy 277). In doing so, they also mirror Freud’s view of the interminability of the therapeutic process, whether continued within formal psychoanalytic sessions or in the lay context of the quest for self-awareness. Similarly, the historical knowledge proclaimed within Malvina Reynolds’s truth can serve a therapeutic purpose as a narrative record from which we can reflect on society. It should be an important component of a larger network of narrative records from music, art, and literature, each important as a moment of truth but not ends in themselves. Further action is required from both the individual and the larger societal unit. It is clear from recent circumstances and societal upheavals throughout history that our cultural psyche is still in need of some introspective self-analysis and observational analytic constructions to move forward in our society’s development.

### Works Cited

- “The Hot 100.” *Billboard.com*. Penske Media Corporation, 22 February 1964. Web. <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/1964-02-22>. 31 May 2022.
- “The Hot 100.” *Billboard.com*. Penske Media Corporation, 26 February 2011. Web. <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/2011-02-26>. 31 May 2022.
- “The Hot 100.” *Billboard.com*. Penske Media Corporation, 19 May 2018. Web. <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/2018-05-19>. 31 May 2022.
- Allison, Elizabeth and Peter Fonagy. “When Is Truth Relevant?” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 85.2 (2016): 275-303. Print.
- Aron, L., H. Ferguson, J. LeDoux, and R. Tweedy. *Rock Music and Psychoanalysis*. Giuseppe Leo, ed. Lecce, Italy: Frenis Zero Press, 2020. Print.
- Ashton, Paul W. and Stephen Bloch, eds. *Music and Psyche: Contemporary Psychoanalytic Explorations*. New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2010. Print.
- Blackburn, Simon. *Truth: A Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.
- DiAngelo, Robin. *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2018. Print.
- Duberman, Martin, et al. “What’s Happening to America? (A Symposium).” *The Partisan Review* 34.1 (Winter 1967): 13-81. Print.
- Eyerman, Ron and Scott Barretta. “From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States.” *Theory and Society* 25.4 (Aug. 1996): 501-543. Print.
- Feder, Stuart, Richard L. Karmel, and George H. Pollock, eds. *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Music*. Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1990. Print.
- . *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Music: Second Series*. Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1993. Print.
- Frankfurt, Henry. *On Truth*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. Standard Edition* 6. London: Hogarth Press, 1905/1960. Print.
- . “Civilization and Its Discontents.” *Standard Edition* 21. London: Hogarth

- Press, 1930/1966, pp. 57-146. Print.
- . "Analysis Terminable and Interminable." *Standard Edition* 23. London: Hogarth Press, 1937a/1964, pp. 209-253. Print.
- . "Constructions in Analysis." *Standard Edition* 23. London: Hogarth Press, 1937b/1964, pp. 256-269. Print.
- Hofstadter, Richard. *The Rise of Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. New York: Vintage Books, 1964. Print.
- Jacoby, Susan. *The Age of American Unreason*. New York: Vintage Books, 2008. Print.
- Jacoby, Russell. *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. New York: Basic Books, 2000. Print.
- Kohan, Jenji, creator. *Weeds: The Complete Collection*. Showtime/Lionsgate 31398-1767-1, 2005-2012. DVD.
- Lund, Jens and R. Serge Denisoff. "The Folk Music Revival and the Counter Culture: Contributions and Contradictions." *The Journal of American Folklore*, 84.334 (Oct.-Dec. 1971): 394-405. Print.
- Manabe, Syukuro and Richard T. Wetherald. "Thermal Equilibrium of the Atmosphere with a Given Distribution of Relative Humidity." *Journal of the Atmospheric Sciences*, 24.3 (May 1967): 241-259. Print.
- McEntyre, Lee. *Post Truth*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018. Print.
- "The Battle of Maxton Field." *North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources*. NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, 11 January 2019. Web. <https://www.ncdcr.gov/blog/2019/01/09/battle-maxton-field>. 20 May 2019.
- Pidcock, Roz. "The most influential climate change papers of all time." *Carbon Brief: Clear on Climate*. Carbon Brief Ltd., 7 June 2015. Web. <https://www.carbonbrief.org/the-most-influential-climate-change-papers-of-all-time>. 20 May 2019.
- Reik, Theodor. *The Haunting Melody: Psychoanalytic Experiences in Life and Music*. New York: Grove Press, 1953. Print.
- Reitman, Nimrod. "Ganz Unmusikalish": Freud's *Seconda Prattica*." *Comparative Literature*, 70.4 (2018): 369-391. Print.
- Reynolds, Malvina. *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth*. Columbia Records CS9414, 1967. Vinyl.
- Sabbath, Daniel. "Freud's Theory of Jokes and the Linear-Analytic Approach to Music: A Few Points in Common." *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Music*. Ed. Stuart Feder, et al. Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1990. Print.
- Schimmel, Nancy. "Malvina Reynolds." *Harvard Square Library*. N.d. Web. <https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/malvina-reynolds/>. March 10, 2022.
- . Message to the author. 30 Mar. 2019. E-mail.
- Schwarz, David. *Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. Print.
- Seeger, Pete. *Rainbow Quest*, Episode 6: Malvina Reynolds and Jack Elliott. Archive.org, 1965. Web. <http://archive.org/details/RainbowQuest06>. March 1, 2022.
- . *Rainbow Quest*, Episode 39: June Carter and Johnny Cash. Archive.org, 1966. Web. <http://archive.org/details/RainbowQuest39>. March 1, 2022.
- Wilson, Samuel, ed. *Music—Psychoanalysis—Musicology*. New York: Routledge, 2018. Print.

Nathan Fleshner  
Assistant Professor  
University of  
Tennessee, USA  
[nfleshne@utk.edu](mailto:nfleshne@utk.edu)  
© Nathan Fleshner 2022

