GROUP IDENTITY IN THE RENAISSANCE WORLD

This book argues that the Renaissance, an era long associated with the historical development of individualism, in fact witnessed the emergence of radically new concepts of group identity. From the end of the fifteenth century, rapidly accelerating globalization intensified cross-cultural encounters, destabilized older categories of large- and small-group identity, and contributed to the rise of new hybrid group concepts. Drawing on insights from psychoanalysis, linguistics, and Simmelian social network theory, this book advances a theory of “group subjectivity” – perceptions, fantasies, and patterns of belief that guide the behaviors of individuals in groups and of groups themselves. Considering not only Europe but also South Asia, Africa, the Sugar Islands of the Atlantic, the Caribbean world, and Brazil, Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski reconsiders the Renaissance in global context, presenting micro-histories of group identity formation, and persuasively argues that we think of that transformational era as a “re-networking” of the world and its peoples, rather than a “rebirth.”

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GROUP IDENTITY IN THE
RENAISSANCE WORLD

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University of Texas, Austin
To my parents

Betty Joan Cotter Wójciehowski

and

James Philip Wójciehowski
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DREAMING THE GROUP: A FREUDIAN
FOREWORD

Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the
style in which they are imagined.

– Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities

At the turn of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud investigated the under-
lying structures of dreams, seeking to locate within them a hidden logic
governing our unconscious lives. In The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), he
proposed that while certain elements of dreams may appear strange or ran-
dom, in fact they are not. Even in dreams – or rather, especially in dreams –
things go together for a reason. To illustrate their combinatory logic and
their relation to the subtending thoughts and fantasies from which dreams
emerge, Freud proposed the following pictorial analogy:

In the first place, dreams take into account in a general way the connection
which undeniably exists between all the portions of the dream-thoughts
by combining the whole material into a single situation or event. They
reproduce logical connection by simultaneity in time [Gleichzeitigkeit]. Here they
are acting like the painter who, in a picture of the School of Athens or of
Parnassus, represents in one group all the philosophers or all the poets. It
is true that they were never in fact assembled in a single hall or on a single
mountain-top; but they certainly form a group in the conceptual sense.

Dreams carry this method of reproduction down to details. Whenever
they show us two elements close together, this guarantees that there is
some specially intimate connection between what correspond to them
among the dream-thoughts.¹

2–3: 319.
In this account of how dreams work – and also, implicitly, of how groups work – Freud refers his readers to two frescos painted by the Renaissance artist Raphael on the walls of the Vatican’s Stanza della Segnatura between 1509 and 1511 (Figures F.1 and F.2). Freud suggests that these two paintings demonstrate by analogy the associative properties of dream-work. In *The School of Athens*, Raphael had depicted the great philosophers of classical antiquity in conversation with each other. At the center of the painting, where the perspectival lines of the cavernous hall converge, the artist positioned the two founding fathers of western philosophy, Plato and his disciple Aristotle. They are rapt in speculation. Around them other legendary thinkers congregate, including Socrates, Zeno, Epicurus, Pythagoras, Euclid, Parmenides, Diogenes, and numerous others. To explain the principle of *Gleichzeitigkeit*, or “simultaneity,” in dreams – that is, the phenomenon of unexpected temporal and/or spatial conjunctions – Freud evokes Raphael’s painterly fabrication of a “single situation or event:” *The School of Athens*, an imagined dialogue between philosophers who lived in widely different historical periods and geographic regions, yet who nevertheless appear together on the vaulted stage of Raphael’s philosophical fantasy.

Similarly, in the *Mount Parnassus* fresco, Apollo, god of poetry and music, together with the nine Muses, presides over a gathering of renowned poets – nine ancient and nine contemporary. The artist envisioned a meeting of literary minds transcending time and space. In one grouping to the left of Apollo and the Muses, the poets Dante, Homer, Virgil, and Statius stand (Figure F.3). In art, as in dreams, such conjunctions are possible. Here the honored poets gather under the auspices of their patron god, perhaps to converse, perhaps to compete, perhaps to share poetry, ideas, and inspiration. Viewers are left to speculate on the nature of their engagements or even to imagine themselves joining the group. Similar to Raphael, who placed together in these frescos persons from different historical periods, as well as imaginary beings (Apollo and the Muses), Freud suggests, so does the dreamer combine diverse memories, experiences, and ideas organized into a narrative structure. These seemingly arbitrary juxtapositions within dreams reveal, on deeper examination, a guiding intentionality at work.

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2 From Vasari’s time down to our own, the identities of the figures in Raphael’s *School of Athens* have been much debated. See, for example, Vasari, *Lives*, 4: 216–218; Passavant, *Raphael of Urbino*, 89–99; Garelo, Ross, and Salomone, *Raffaello: La Scuola di Atene*; Bell, “New Identifications,” 638–646; Rowland, “The Intellectual Background of the *School of Athens*,” 131–175; and Joost-Gaugier, *Raphael’s Stanza della Segnatura*. 
The principle of simultaneity extends still more deeply within Raphael’s composition, however, because several images of the philosophers are thought to be portraits of the artist’s contemporaries. Michelangelo might have served as the model for the brooding figure draped in purple who dominates the center foreground of the painting, thought to be Heraclitus, ancient philosopher of change and flux. On the extreme right, Raphael painted himself, possibly as the sharp-eyed Apelles, and the androgynous figure in a white robe could represent Pico della Mirandola or Francesco della Rovere, or, according to popular speculation, Hypatia, as Raphael’s mistress. Leonardo, bearded and magisterial, is said to appear as Plato (see Figures F.4–F.7). In one painted figure, two (or perhaps more) historical persons converge, just as in dreams one person can stand in for another, or multiple meanings may be condensed within a single symbol. In this pivotal passage in The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud paves the way for his famous analysis of condensation and displacement, the twin mechanisms employed by the unconscious to distort, displace, compress, or magnify the image-text of the dream—namely, the feelings or impulses that are given expression in dream-work.

Although Raphael’s two frescos appear at first glance to be limpid illustrations of Freud’s concept of Gleichzeitigkeit, or simultaneity in dreams, we may well ask why he chose these two images in particular. There would, of course, have been any number of ways to analogize the placing together of disparate persons, objects, or themes in dreams. Was there a deeper logic driving this choice, which appears at the crux of Freud’s explanation of dream-work, and which serves in a sense as the vanishing point of his own argument?

It is probably not a coincidence that Freud explains the phenomenon of Gleichzeitigkeit through the previously discussed visual analogies to two
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well-known works of art from the Renaissance. That period of history extending from the late fourteenth century in Italy to the early seventeenth

Freud would return to these two frescos in his 1915 essay “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death.” Describing a time before WWI, he wrote,

Nor must we forget that each of these citizens of the civilized world had created for himself a “Parnassus” and a “School of Athens” of his own. From among the great thinkers, writers
Dreaming the Group: A Freudian Foreword

The School of Athens has long been celebrated – or disparaged – as an era of extravagant individualism. This book explores how that era also heralded the transformation of the group, and of the community, because one change could not have occurred without the other. This transformation and reorganization of collective identities took place for the first time on a truly global scale. In his two telling analogies explaining the logic of dreams, Freud inadvertently highlights an aspect thereof – the combination of people in new, unexpected, and unconventional groupings, organized by choice and by fantasy. In doing so, he suggests another significant feature of collectives: namely, that groups do and artists of all nations he had chosen those to whom he considered he owed the best of what he had been able to achieve in enjoyment and understanding of life, and he had venerated them along with the immortal ancients as well as with the familiar masters of his own tongue. None of these great men had seemed to him foreign because they spoke another language – neither the incomparable explorer of human passions, nor the intoxicated worshipper of beauty, nor the powerful and menacing prophet, nor the subtle satirist; and he never reproached himself on that account for being a renegade towards his own nation and his beloved mother-tongue.

not have to be real – historical, concrete entities – to exert a powerful influence on cultures. Through these illustrations in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud throws into relief the virtual group, the group as fantasy. It is possible not just in dreams but also in our imaginative lives to create new groupings of people, as well as animals, objects, and concepts.

Perspectival tour de force that it is, *The School of Athens* can be said to illustrate yet another conceptual phenomenon of which it serves as visual analogy: the unconscious lives of groups. Mastering the art and science of perspective, a new development of the Renaissance,⁵ Raphael organized his

⁵ See, for example, Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*; Kemp, *The Science of Art*; and Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective.*
fantasy around a vanishing point at the center of the painting, a point where multiple lines of perspective converge. That vanishing point has been carefully, perhaps ironically, obscured by the artist, who positions the two leading

As Kubovy notes, “The most obvious function of perspective was to rationalize the representation of space: With the advent of perspective, it became much easier to stage, as it were, elaborate group scenes organized in a spatially complex fashion” (1).