

Ghosts, Trauma and Travel Fever in Psychoanalysis

A reflection on working with the transgenerational transmission of trauma

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[Ghosts in the Consulting Room: Echoes of Trauma in Psychoanalysis](#), published by the *Relational Perspectives Book Series*, delves into the overwhelming feelings related to mourning. Bringing together a collection of clinical and theoretical papers, it features accounts of the unpredictable effects of trauma that emerge within clinical work, often unexpectedly, in ways that surprise both patient and therapist. Distinguished psychoanalysts examine how to work with a variety of 'ghosts', as they manifest in the relationship between patient and analyst, in work with children and adults, in institutional settings and even in the very founders and foundations of the field of psychoanalysis itself. They explore the dilemma of how to process loss when it is unspeakable and unknowable, often arising in silence or gaps in knowledge, and living in strange relations to time and space. Read an extract from chapter three, *Travel Fever: transgenerational trauma and witnessing in analyst and analysand*, by Michael J. Feldman below.

"What haunts are not the dead but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others." Notes on the Phantom, N. Abraham (1987)

Aaron called in for a phone session from Poland. On tour with a relentless schedule and demanding director but without much money, this hand- some young artist was on his own, checking trays in hotel hallways for uneaten scraps of food. Surprisingly amused, he laughed at his nightly rounds; I was startled and blurted something out. "You're a Jewish boy in Warsaw with nothing to eat, maybe feeling overwhelmed is about something else!" Aaron didn't connect hunger or continuous travel with the flight of his father's family during the Second World War. He didn't relate a director ordering him around now with a domineering father bossing him around as a boy without protection from a depressed mother. Cutting ties to any childhood past, Aaron lived in the RIGHT here and RIGHT now. Past and future collapsed into a present and any sense of space was vast and unbounded. And it went further. Keeping out ghosts from father's childhood, Aaron kept himself in the dark from ghosts of his own, including frequent moves between parental homes tending to younger brothers and sisters. When we first met, Aaron insisted he didn't need a home, food or

sleep, only his work. It shouldn't be a surprise that his main artistic theme was collapsing families.

In a state of manic denial and psychic numbness, Aaron filled every free moment developing new work. Day was structured by a strict regimen of diet and exercise. But when night fell and action failed, he was haunted. Unable to sleep, he became "porous with travel fever," (Mitchell, *Hejira*, 1976). He switched into trance-like states of movement, wandered without rest in whatever town he was in or found refuge on long-distance flights to Paris. Like his other nightly rounds, Aaron had little curiosity about these spectral experiences and laughed them off. With minimal expense, he got himself to the nearest airport and purchased a ticket using numerous frequent flyer points and considerable charm. I nearly missed it. Flight was refuge. I wasn't sure Aaron could be curious enough about his ethereal high-speed act to think about the scarier prospect of slowing down.

A central thesis of this chapter is how broad historical trauma affecting many, if not all, during the 20th century and personal experience of it, collide and create symptoms that are passed down the generations. Historical is the larger context for personal. Psychoanalysts, especially American, also descend from forbearers who survived forced or voluntary emigration, global war, and economic hardship throughout the same time period. Either or both forms of trauma, historical or personal, may be familiar and remembered or eclipsed and seemingly forgotten. The encounter between personal traumatic legacy in patient and analyst is often unrecognized. In this case presentation, negotiating impasse first required the analyst to remember and rework his own traumatic legacy more fully. Only then, could he create space in which the patient could gradually become more aware of experienced and inherited traumatic past. Initially through enactment and physical language, which better suited his defensive structures and artistic temperament, analysis induced analyst into a joint experience of intense immersion for both to witness. That required the analyst to participate in unconventional ways before his usual role, translating action into word to create meaning, became tolerable. Common language, or its absence, proved essential in this process. Above all, this chapter is about the disorientation of secrecy and perpetual migration. I suggest, "Fasten your seatbelts it (is) going to be a bumpy night" (Mankiewicz, 1950). Keeping this in mind when reading itself feels disorienting. It is not intentional. It may be inevitable.

Gap

From the start, Aaron's nocturnal spells made me imagine father's flight from childhood home during wartime. Unprocessed traumatic affect from flight during war was unconsciously transmitted to Aaron in ways he was

compulsively repeating in action. Davoine and Gaudilliere (2004) describe a type of madness in patients who experience massive historical and societal trauma. Psychic collision of time, space, and history produce symptomatic “collapses of time and . . . speech,” similar to those Aaron may have inherited from his father, who didn’t sleep either, even though Aaron never experienced war himself.

Legacy of historical trauma may be passed down even when traumatic experience is forgotten or disavowed. Madness, described above, is also meant to capture a confused and desperate attempt by the subject to maintain meaningful social attachment under extreme circumstances. The subject’s symptoms repeat a version of “what it was necessary to do in order to survive” (Davoine & Gaudilliere, 2004, p.xxiii). I wondered if Aaron’s symptoms were showing us what he, or preceding generations of family members, needed to do to maintain the crucial attachment required for psychic survival under extreme conditions.

Our unexpected interaction around searching for food in Warsaw, an uncanny collision involving inherited and experienced trauma, signaled the presence of hidden history. Faimberg (2005), who also links symptoms in the present with traumatic experience in parental past, suggests there are always at least three generations present in the consulting room: subject, parent, and grandparent. A “telescoping of generations” occurs based on the subject’s unconscious identification with important ancestors who endured massive trauma. Split off in order to evade conscious memory, identification becomes detectable only at key moments in transference-countertransference interplay similar to the one between us “when the discovery of the secret history,” becomes possible (Faimberg, 2005, p.8). But Aaron’s need for control left him unprepared for the ambiguities in time and space stirred up by daily life and intensified in the psychoanalytic situation. Deployment of continuous work constituted what Baranger and Baranger (2008) would call Aaron’s “personal bastion,” a psychic space of refuge containing reassuring and omnipotent fantasies sorely needed to ward off helplessness, vulnerability, and despair. From the subject’s point of view the bastion exists in a matter of fact way to protect it from becoming a focus of analytic exploration.

When we first met, Aaron was a prodigious artist in his late 20s, cheerful, talented, and outwardly humble. But there was a tension between us. His soft whisper of a voice pulled me closer, while his abstract words pushed me away. I was working hard just to hear him, but we spoke different languages. This was the first example of language as barrier. His was fleet, ethereal, and post-modern, mine clumsy, heavy, and outdated. Aaron’s body language was also disorienting. Perched forward on the edge of his chair, Aaron broke through usual spatial boundary between analysand and analyst. He was in

charge and I was off balance. Setting his own control, he used his body to regulate anxiety.

Aaron's spectral presentation, calm bright eyes and quiet smile, but rigid forward leaning body, was out of his awareness but resonated with Bleger's (1967) description of the subject's "ghost world." In his words, it represents relatively primitive or psychotic parts of the subject's ego. By projecting such ghostly psychic content onto the analytic frame, the subject uses it as a site where unconscious struggle with the analyst takes place, destabilizing its usual function as stable container. Current attack by the subject originates during early preverbal development and represents an attempt to ward off fear of invasion or persecution. It is meant to control the body and mind of both patient and analyst. To that end, Baranger and Baranger (2008) advise the analyst to attend to his own bodily sensations, insofar as they alert him to "invasions" by the subject "who is placing an aspect of his personal experience inside the analyst." I thought of introjection and projection onto a depressed mother.

When affective experience of traumatic experience threatens to resurface within the analytic relationship, the subject may anticipate the internal flood all over again with renewed fears of persecution, isolation, and psychic abandonment. This is the moment Gerson (2009) describes, "when the psychic container cracks," when the witnessing third is lost, "when the third is dead." At that moment, a dead third haunts the consulting room, an absence that is present or presence that is absent. It has the power to numb and disorient analyst and analyst.

Overwhelming dissociated affect also makes itself known through noticeable gaps in narrative. Gaps prevent recall of emotional experience and construction of coherent memory or narrative in one or both clinical partners. The French analyst quoted earlier, Nicolas Abraham (1987), believes gaps represent unspeakable unknown secrets buried in the unconscious by important others. Gaps are inhabited by "phantoms" the French word for ghosts that nevertheless haunt the subject. I understood Aaron's detached lack of curiosity about crucial, but missing, details of his personal and family history as evidence of unconscious gaps. His psychic survival had required splitting off and evacuating unbearable haunting affects from unthinkable family secrets that remained buried within him. The unbearable and unthinkable traumatic past he found impossible to represent and recall symbolically, he was discharging somatically and compulsively. I registered it as so disorganizing it made staying with him even more challenging. Along with disruptions in the frame, these disorienting gaps repeatedly threatened to crack my containing mind. I came to learn this was the language of ghosts.

Aaron wasn't the only one with ghosts. Phantoms of my own were stirring

from grandparents who fled Central Europe before the First World War and my father's childhood in Brooklyn during the Great Depression. My father's parents fled Russian partitioned Poland to the east and my mother's parents left Austrian partitioned Poland to the south. Usually referred to by its provincial name, Galicia, the Austrian partition had the largest Jewish population in all of Austria at that time. Aaron's joke about scavenging for food in Poland triggered an inherited fear of deprivation and violence because of the eerie way it located him in my ancestral home-land. But again, it was more complicated still. Inherited fear came to mind quickly. Even though I didn't experience those events myself they were well known through family history I'd heard many times. Personally experienced fear from my own trip to Poland decades earlier was temporarily split off and only came to mind later. When I visited Poland, then a Soviet satellite under martial law, I was so afraid of going hungry I took along a jar of peanut butter. But in the office, our bodies do the talking; inherited and experienced trauma activated inside mine, disavowed and numbing inside his.

Unconscious transmission also played a role. At that stage of treatment, Aaron not I was the hungry other. In part, I may have assigned him my historical hunger and shame to avoid thinking about them. To create a live analytic third, as Gerson suggests, I had to lead the way, remembering and acknowledging my own ghosts before Aaron could begin thinking about his. Blurting out in session, followed by memory of personal fear regarding hunger and dangerous travel, was a step in that direction.

From the beginning of our work, Aaron described me as "the calm center" of his chaotic world. But as soon as we agreed to meet twice a week, he announced he was leaving on tour. Surprised, I suggested exploring his feelings about our dilemma. Instead of curiosity he called up his bastion and doubted whether I truly understood him and the demands of his career. Without empathy, Aaron showed me his travel schedule for the next two years in meticulous, mind-numbing detail. I was speechless. Language deserted me. Eventually, I understood our enactment as one version of internal conflict between shame and omnipotence. He evacuated shock and confusion, leaving him powerful and in control. He was the demanding and bossy director/father and I was the helpless child.

I also understood the enactment as Aaron's need to get out, just when things between us were heating up. Being together in a calm warm way was dangerous. Experience of me as attentive and accepting stirred up intolerable longing and desire or fear of destructive collapse. What he wasn't able or ready to express in words he was communicating in action. Flight was refuge. It was also a stealth attack on the frame.

One of many moments I had of profound uncertainty, I felt unable to think. When we discussed videoconferencing, I was unsure expanding the

frame would contain Aaron; but without trying, the long-term treatment he needed would surely collapse. I didn't know if Aaron was leaving or staying, if the treatment was ending or surviving. Faimberg (2005) describes the analyst's need to bear the anxiety of not knowing, and sometimes not even existing in the subject's psyche, as a key task in working with these patients. I did feel pulled toward the dead third and challenged to show my capacity for rescue, a tension in the countertransference that would repeat many times. Either way, he was using his bastion to reset at a time when the intensity of our relationship unsettled him.

A dream from a videoconferencing session confirmed haunted space: "I'm in France, on a French couch. There are 200 nude bodies in an abandoned warehouse connected by wire."

Associations followed to art installation, sex, contagion, and death. "It's a strange dream, because I feel antiseptic toward sex," as though the dream belonged to someone else. More associations with sex and death. His father, with a history of compulsive sexual behavior, was recently diagnosed with prostate cancer. In a guilty identification with the aggressor, Aaron was preoccupied he himself was infected with a sexually transmitted virus and worried they both might die.

This was one of Aaron's first dreams. There was so much to unpack and he wasn't even in the room. It was also a transference dream and the couch was the portal through which ghostly fear came to mind. I wondered how the couch, flown to France as well, activated conflictual sexuality and guilt. Aaron tended to find older partners who were also sexually promiscuous. Eventually he admitted thinking about the Holocaust but was worried about saying so. "You're Jewish, I don't want to hurt you." Although it was his dream, and the Second World War an essential chapter in inherited family history, he located its legacy in me making him anxious and guilty. Later I learned he was assigning victim status to me, dismissing the possibility he was also a victim. Being a passive victim was intolerable. I registered unconscious uncertainty about playing dual roles in that tragedy, even though I remembered France was victim and aggressor.

Aaron also disavowed his victim status by denying his father's religious identity as Jewish. He only described him as Tunisian. Need to avoid religion altogether helped him avoid acknowledging his father was a persecuted victim during the war and a stateless refugee before migrating to Israel because of religious identity. Evacuating victim status into me made me carrier of Holocaust legacy for us both and it made him feel guilty. Years later I would hear about father's experience in a French transit camp outside Marseilles, the required route for North African Jews emigrating to

Israel. Aaron's dream originated from the unconscious transmission and fantasy about father's internment there, transit camp condensed with concentration camp. But for now, what happened to him during the war, and after, was off screen. Personal traumatic experience within larger historical trauma fractured history and memory, splitting religious and national identity. Unconscious splits generated gaps inhabited by phantoms, recalling Abraham and Faimberg, creating problems in the treatment that would last for years. Instead of exploring the impact of war on his family and its meaning for Aaron, we were caught up in prolonged struggle over personal traumatic legacy. In retrospect, impasse over identity resembled attack on frame.

My paternal legacy was resonating too. With my father gravely ill, I was in a race against time to replace gaps with information about his childhood in Brooklyn during the Depression. Since his first language was Yiddish, there was always something foreign and exotic about the parts of his childhood he did speak about. But I wanted answers to replace the haunting gaps he avoided, hoping they also would explain why he often seemed so remote. When he was a young boy, his mother required an extended hospitalization. Because his father had to work during that time, he was forced to place his two young sons in a local Jewish orphanage. My father was so traumatized by this experience he never spoke about it. He preferred telling happier stories about his large extended family, turning a blind eye to the fact none of them took him in.

Gaps transmitted from my father's childhood made me assume I had special understanding of Aaron and the unspoken secret his father transmitted to him. Goldberger (1993) calls this a "bright spot," a false belief blinding me to Aaron's unique history because I assumed it was the same as mine. Both relationships were frustrating. Neither Aaron, nor my father wanted anything to do with the past. They didn't need me asking questions; they needed me to carry the gap in a state of silent mindless loss. In both cases, family trauma was mixed up with historical trauma, from the Second World War to worldwide economic depression to the founding of the State of Israel. We were both sensitive sons haunted by gaps left within us by our fathers' secrets.

For Abraham (1987), once the secret is buried it must remain buried. Gaps and ghosts pass unconsciously from parent to child and "the special problem in these analyses lies in the (subject's) horror at violating a parental or family secret" inscribed there (p. 290). Davoine and Gaudilliere offer a description closer to the subject's conscious experience. Because descendants, like Aaron or I for that matter, didn't experience war or economic depression personally, we don't identify with it even though it's just beneath the surface.

Denying paternal Jewish identity helped Aaron disavow his connection with that trauma and any possibility of sharing buried family secrets. Aaron wanted to bring my Jewish identity into the room first, along with the ghosts haunting me. It made him feel guilty because it was just beneath the surface in him. He was testing me. By evacuating inherited shame and vulnerability, he was aggressively searching for my witnessing, containing mind, and finding it; or by collapsing it, confirming his fear of being abandoned, naked, and wired.

This time, however, I didn't stay paralyzed. As a former student of performing arts myself, my body wasn't dead and my mind wasn't numb. I was full of feeling that was physical and emotional. I was surviving Aaron's attack and reactivating my analytic mind as an embodied listener and witness (Reis 2009).

Detour

To a large extent, reactivation made me revisit my trip to Poland because it wasn't only peanut butter and hunger that came to mind but compelling excitement and fear of forbidden adventure. In many ways, Aaron and I had different strains of travel fever: his to forget, mine to remember. After college, I went to West Berlin to study German and use it as a base to explore the Eastern Bloc. Even those names conjure up a particularly traumatic, ghostly time and place, now a footnote buried in European history. Every weekend I went to the Museum of German History to absorb the complex contradiction of what took place there. When the time finally came, I boarded a night train heading east. I wanted to walk the streets of Warsaw and visit Galicia, or what was left of it, in the south. But a question kept coming up without an easy answer: why German? With whom did I imagine speaking once I got there?

My curiosity about the German language may have been another form of telescoping into me the traumatic loss and near extinction of Yiddish, my father's first language and, the language of my grandparents and generations before him. Rather than bury this loss I took up learning its modern cousin. Then I realized I wasn't just traveling, I was time traveling. Unconsciously, time collapsed. Instead of 1984, it could have been 1944 or even 1914 and language, once again, played a crucial if undefined role. When my grandparents lived in Galicia before the First World War, city names were written in three national languages—German, Polish, and Ukrainian. They could have been written in a fourth, Yiddish, even though it was not the language of an officially recognized nation. It was the language, however, of

the one destined to disappear in little more than a generation like a ghost language. Galicia, at that time, was the most porous spot in Central Europe before it disappeared like a ghost altogether. Arrival in Poland wasn't nearly as frightening as I imagined, and I didn't need the peanut butter. I was jazzed up by surprise and curiosity in the faces of people I met. It was unheard of in those days for Americans, let alone young Jewish ones, to visit Poland. There weren't even hotels for foreigners. Most Poles had never met a Jewish person and without museums or education they knew few basic facts of Jewish history or the mass extermination that took place there. Being with them, with disorienting gaps of their own, came to mind later in my work with Aaron. Unaware or dismissive of traumatic past hiding in plain sight through connection with traumatizing present, they made me feel like the phantom inhabiting the gap, returning from a lost and haunting part of buried Polish history. It was collision of time and space in both directions. I was haunting them, and they were haunting me. As I made my way south, this disconnection increased. My grandparents' village had disappeared too. Beneath my fear and excitement, something deeper was grounding and activating me in ways I didn't fully realize until I reached the village of Oswiecim. Austrian Galicia, home to one of the largest Jewish populations in Central Europe, became German Gailzien, site of the darkest chapter in Jewish history. During both periods, it was known by its German name, Auschwitz. My mother's parents were born less than two hours away. Her grandparents may have died there.

Without visible markers, it was difficult to process the massive scale of loss that occurred there. I felt disappointed even betrayed. West Germany built museums for its ghosts. Soviet Poland built state-sponsored amnesia. Despite photographic images, time, neglect, and deliberate destruction had erased much of the evidence leaving in its place another gap—a phantom extermination camp.

To reach some level of acceptance about what happened there, I remember repeating to myself out loud, in German and English, to steel myself in both languages in case ghosts of victims or perpetrators were listening. *Wir haben uberlebt.* We survived. I remember wanting to remind the perpetrators as well as the victims. They failed, we survived; another meaning of learning German. Looking back, I realize survival creates opportunities to witness and create narratives, transforming shame into grief and eventually mourning. Much of Aaron's struggle represented traumatic repetition in the face of massive resistance to remembering or violating family secrets. Selective identification and disavowal helped avoid remembering what didn't happen to him and affective contact with a family legacy of trauma and victimization.

The calamity of the 20th century that affected my family most was the

Great Depression. With my father's health rapidly declining, I was trying to learn more about his childhood community in eastern Brooklyn, including the orphanage. By chance, I learned the name was the Brooklyn Hebrew Orphan Asylum (BHOA). When I went to scout that location, there was no menacing building only non-descript public housing. Again, what happened there had been erased. But on my second walk around the block, I noticed a statue tucked away in a corner. There was a small child crying with a plaque underneath identifying this as the site of the BHOA. It was nearly as shattering as Auschwitz. I returned to my father with documentation of my personal experience of the orphanage, sure it would move him to be more open and share more of his experience there and how he survived it. Wanting to witness with him but not for him I said, "I have something that belongs to you," handing him the photograph, "and I'm giving it back."

But he didn't want to remember and he didn't want a witness. "I know you want me to tell you something, but all I can say is this. Nothing bad happened to me there, but also nothing good." Then silence. Reflecting on this moment with my father when Aaron and I were at an impasse clarified an important point. Dismissal by Aaron created mind-numbing silence.

Tacit acknowledgment in my father's presence witnessed my experience of gaps from his traumatic history, even though he refused my wish to witness his. Sometimes filling a gap completely is impossible and part of a secret or even just a thoughtful question must be enough. My father's response wasn't as revealing as I'd hoped but it was a moment of authentic connection and largely silent possibly mutual witnessing. It remains a powerful memory.

Traumatic separation, shame, and guilt weren't my childhood experience they were telescoped into me. I had been trying to fill that gap often with unconscious fantasy. Like Aaron's dream about the transit camp in France, I had a recurrent childhood dream about being lost in an ominous institution with no room of my own. Whenever we happened to drive past an orphanage on Sunday family drives, silence made me shiver. It was the nightmare my father lived and thought he kept to himself but buried inside me unconsciously, as a "foreign body." It belonged to him not me (Abraham 1987). Acknowledging his secret history, even if it remained mostly unwritten, replaced the haunting gap with a partial answer. That, I could live with.

With a new focus on survival and memory, I returned to Aaron's symptoms of insomnia, nocturnal flight, and restless work. I returned without assumptions about the traumatic experience his family endured and knew only fragments of what they had to do in order to survive even if that meant

“forgetting” as my father tried to do. Watch out, stay busy, don’t sleep. If there’s a ghost in your room get out. If your house is haunted, don’t have one. Maybe the Holocaust could wait. Aaron took to my curiosity about survival and we began moving out of the aggressor-victim dynamic that had stalled us. I became more curious about Jewish history in French North Africa, though I kept it to myself for the time being. If war and flight were too painful to remember or imagine, I could research, even scaffold them for Aaron as I tried with my father.

History lesson

I learned a great deal about Jewish history in North Africa, especially under Fascist occupation. Much of it lies beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will highlight important points that relate to Aaron through family experience I did hear about or re-imagined in the context of historical source material. The legacy of French North African Jews is one of loss, dislocation, and migration spanning more than a generation. It must have overwhelmed a family of modest resources repeatedly forced to adapt to war and foreign occupation, migration, and assimilation to insure physical and psychic survival.

Aaron’s father was born to a Jewish family that had lived in Tunisia for generations. During the preceding half century, the country had been a small protectorate, along with Algeria and Morocco, in what was known as French North Africa or the Maghreb. Later, scaffolding helped me learn the family migrated to Israel sometime after the Second World War, not before or during, as I had imagined. In the 1960s they left for America. In Aaron’s mind, further detail was mostly gap, more missing than secret or ghostly. He knew little of their emigration or his father’s coming of age, even less about their experience of war and occupation.

Soon, Aaron speculated more openly about rumors of an uncle who died in Israel during military training, another who became psychotic. Ghosts were appearing directly, tied to unspoken loss that traumatized the entire family and it was in fact just beneath the surface. I was surprised as much by Aaron’s lack of information as his lack of curiosity. He had even grown up on the same street as his grandparents. Then I realized that like my grandparents, they also spoke a different language; he understood even less since they only spoke it with each other. It was a North African dialect called Judeo-Arabic mixed with French and Hebrew.

The role of common language, or lack of one, reasserted a primary role in whether traumatic experience was transmitted in a more benign or malignant way. The language barrier prevented his family from sharing a coherent narrative of massive loss and dislocation with Aaron and his

siblings, the third generation. In place of memory or witnessing, unconscious transmission of traumatic affect and defense occurred as buried secrets, phantoms, and physical symptoms. Our own experience speaking different languages when treatment began was a likely repetition of that barrier.

With the fall of France at the beginning of the war, French North Africa was administered by the Fascist government in Vichy. This is when Aaron's father was born. In contrast to swift and severe anti-Jewish law imposed in Europe, where my theories originated, anti-Semitic policy in the Maghreb was lax. That is until late 1942 when the German Army fully occupied Tunisia. SS units quickly began recruiting Jewish men as forced labor. Although Aaron's grandparents were surely affected by German occupation, with expectable fear of forced labor or loss of home and property, Aaron received no memory or narrative to make their experience real or understandable. Aaron's father was quite young in the war years with few ways of registering fear and helplessness beyond the somatic.

Historical record shows the German Army was quickly forced to surrender. Given the relatively brief period of occupation and war, and the absence of systematic deportation or mass extermination, it seemed plausible, as Aaron had insisted, there was no Holocaust in Tunisia, at least not like the one in Europe.

What did occur there were massive air bombardments on a nightly basis, from Allied and Axis forces, causing significant loss of life to Jewish men forced to work the German airfields. Spectral connection with Aaron's nocturnal distress did not escape my notice, and I remembered his father's insomnia also. Transmission from father to son. It felt like a potential entry point but Aaron was uninterested in exploring it further. Without more specific family history we remained stalled. In short, where was the war? Conflictual Jewish identity also persisted. It even intensified as a new gap and family secret emerged. Aaron was time traveling also. New information, as phantom, threatened his powerful capacity to control emotion. Traveling in the Middle East, Aaron was stopped by Israeli Immigration who then separated him from his group for further questioning. For Aaron it could have been 1942 and interrogation by the SS.

It may as well have been. The authorities told him he was an Israeli citizen. Denial of Jewish identity and historical victimization collapsed. Aaron had never been more terrified. He was afraid of prolonged detention and conscription into the army. Later he learned his father had secretly made all of his children Israeli citizens years earlier. Children of Israeli citizens are automatically eligible for citizenship but only when both parents are Jewish. Aaron's father declared his mother was also Jewish when she wasn't. After

all, his father laughed, her name was Rachel. But she was Protestant. His father transmitted Jewish identity to Aaron through a buried secret and the secret was a lie. Metaphor was too concrete and transference fear too intense. Conflict and confusion made compromise more brittle. Any further exploration of Jewish identity was perceived as attack motivated by my need to turn him into a passive victim. It was also intolerable. He demanded we shelve the entire topic or he else he would leave treatment.

As France withdrew from its colonies most Jews throughout the Maghreb did leave for Israel through transit camps outside Marseilles. When they finally arrived in Israel and discovered deprivation in the young State, many chose to return to North Africa. Later Aaron told me his family returned to North Africa before leaving for Israel a second time and eventually the United States. Serial dislocation and migration in parent and grandparent established travel fever in both generations directly above Aaron. His nightmare of the camp, like mine about the orphanage, derived from our fathers' traumatic experience in childhood in the context of larger historical shocks they couldn't understand or represent symbolically.

Aaron became as preoccupied with North Africa as his own lost homeland, similar to and different from my father's lifelong attachment to Brooklyn, rather than where we lived in Ohio. Tunisia as the lost homeland also denied a certain inconvenient truth of history. Jews living there were never more than second-class citizens, in fact not even citizens, any more than my ancestors were considered Austrian. No doubt my decision to learn German (before the symbolic end of childhood) was also informed by my personal choice of selective historical identity, but in addition to, rather than in place of, being Jewish. For Aaron, learning JUDEO-arabic was both impractical and intolerable. Instead, he chose French, linking him to Tunisia and France. It's no surprise that New York as a "lost" home was also telescoped into me and that to live anywhere else, except Berlin, never came to mind. Aaron's insistence, based on conscious identification and unconscious fantasy, may also have originated with his grandparents. Yet it was a place Aaron had never seen and following his experience in Israel he was determined to visit Tunisia, forget false identity, and reestablish his true one. As he allowed the unconscious gap to become a tolerable question, we began to think about ghosts originating in different parts of the Mediterranean.

With war and serial migration still off screen, we discovered a theme that did resonate with Aaron free of externally driven internal conflict. It was Exile; and it stimulated his curiosity about migration. He preferred Tunisian and French ghosts to Israeli and Jewish ones. With it came the possibility of replacing ghosts with acceptable and active ancestors.

And then my understanding of both complex relationships, with Aaron and with my father, came full circle. The impasse with my father helped me rethink the standstill with Aaron and vice versa. Separation from family coincided with my father beginning school and his formal entrance into the English-speaking world. Years later, I appreciate more deeply how traumatic but temporary separation screened off painful feelings about the permanent loss of his insular Yiddish-speaking world of childhood. He was also an exile, though that visible scar did not completely derail development.

Holding onto his first language and speaking it whenever he could provided a lasting connection. I grew up hearing him speak it all the time and remember the way his voice and personality would light up. Nothing remote. It was painful he wasn't that lively with us but it wasn't exactly distancing. It was quirky but it was more like an interesting puzzle to figure out. Whenever friends picked up on his speech and asked if he was an immigrant it didn't embarrass me. I just laughed and said, "He's an immigrant from Brooklyn." I was born and raised in the Midwest so his language stood out. I was also referred for a speech evaluation when I began grade school. Uncanny. Diagnosis: he's fine, but is someone in your family from Brooklyn?

Now, with my newest language, psychoanalysis, I wonder if my father, who buried secrets of all kinds, also placed his love of language inside me, which I took up as a way of being closer to him. My Brooklyn accent as a child from imitating my father's accent and learning new languages ran throughout a relationship that was rarely verbal. Learning German partially bridged the barrier between us and partial connection with my father was often the most I could expect. It also created a psychic space where unspoken identification and connection could exist alongside another buried secret, loss and exile for both of us from each other.

Aaron had a different experience. His father's permanent loss of his first home, language, and security following war and emigration, preceded loss of a second homeland and language. Though he had no trouble learning English, he was unable to assimilate successfully in the third. Cumulative personal and historical trauma was divided among three languages that he wasn't able to sufficiently represent or integrate. In turn he transmitted to Aaron fragments of information, gaps filled with secret, and traumatic affects and defenses registered in his body. Aaron's grandparents also spoke a rare dialect but had fewer to speak it with and were largely unable to communicate with him. A common language—crucial to symbolize, metabolize, and share traumatic history between three generations—simply did not exist. It left Aaron in the dark and the two of us with a recurrent language barrier of our own.

Shift

Despite initial fear, videoconferencing transformed the treatment. As the frame became more flexible past struggle all but disappeared. As the new frame settled, resistance decreased and the therapeutic process began to deepen. Sessions in person combined with sessions on the Internet, set the treatment on a global migration directly tied to Aaron's travel that felt familiar and comfortable and left him in control. The new frame allowed migration to enter our dialogue, though he was not ready for me to speak other than asking him to tell me more. He remained guarded against interpretation because it pointed out experience outside his control, which to him implied criticism.

Overall, Aaron's reaction was unequivocally positive. Despite frequent changes of geographic location, he felt our connection stronger than any he had experienced before. Flight was still a refuge but no longer escape. Without interest in exploring the change, he preferred thinking about migration, and it became the new organizing idea of treatment.

Enactment of pulling me in to join him led to hope of my understanding him through action in ways he could not express in words. I experienced his steady stream of postcards and notices, where limited words were safe, as much more than maintaining attachment. They were love letters. Later he called this seduction but any hint of sexuality at that time was meant to control or neutralize my thinking and potential interpretation. Because the new frame was better able to contain him, it was better suited to survive aggressive attack. It even invited aggressive seduction and a wish for intimacy.

With Aaron's travel fever breaking, I was starting to sweat. Continuing to evacuate disorientation from life on the run, Aaron was placing his fever in me. To ground myself now as participant and witness, I needed to locate him in the world each session. He dismissed my questions and my disorientation. It infuriated him because it implied I was blaming him. "I'm here," he said and that was it. He was bossy, I was helpless. It was another collision with his bastion he had no interest in exploring. Facing massive resistance, I stopped asking when I realized I had other options. By referring to our sessions as "Tuesdays and Thursdays at 5," the days and time we were together in my unchanging location, I could ground myself and reestablish an analytic attitude. He traveled and I stayed put. He could appear at my door or on my computer screen. Sometimes I wouldn't know which until the session began. Ghostly attack on the frame continued but the disorienting effect was less destructive.

Remembering I was in the same place every session was a small

calibration, crucial in reducing my feverish need to locate Aaron at the beginning of each session. He could be anywhere in the world and call in from any location—a hotel room, a studio, a theater, an airport, a private patch of grass. Unreliable Wi-Fi heightened spectral connection, as though he was contacting me from another time or place as inconsistent transmission often froze the screen or interrupted speech. Sometimes forced to find small space at the last minute, he hid himself, and us, from others nearby. Pulling me into haunted space, that was literally long distance, he never missed a session and was rarely late. It was his ghost world and he knew how to manage this far better than I. The frame became a 21st century structure outside conventional definition of shared time and space. It was still a container, a psychic structure whose walls were supported by our joint capacity to represent them. And it was portable. Unsurprisingly, fear

of collapse decreased considerably.

The longer Aaron was away, the more desire for closeness appeared in the transference. He began asking me to see his work and having dreams in which I appeared. Before I took a short vacation he told me, “I had another disturbing dream and this time you were in it.” We were in my home, where Aaron secretly watched me taking care of my young son though I couldn’t see him. In the basement was a swimming pool he admired where I was lifeguard. He wanted me to take him in but was afraid I didn’t have time for him and would send him away, maybe to an asylum. The prospect of my leaving him, rather than his leaving me, activated an intense wish in the transference for nurturing protection and fear of abandoning rejection. Deeper exploration of internal life under my watchful eye was fraught with danger. Secretly watching my son and I together, revealed Aaron’s aggressive envy and wish to take my son’s place.

In fact, Aaron was the oldest of many siblings born in rapid succession. Throughout early childhood he must have watched his mother tending to them with yearning, jealousy, even resentment he needed to repress. Physical intimacy with her free from distraction of younger siblings must have been brief. Loss of her caring attention must have felt like being sent away. Ill equipped to regulate his own intense emotions and cast out into asylum-like family chaos, Aaron must have registered profound affective dysregulation throughout his body and other symptoms including insomnia. In the dream, Aaron expressed confusion: did he want to join us or have me to himself? Desire for intimacy, being internal, was confused with intrusion. He was risking rejection just when he wanted me most.

When I returned a week later, Aaron was in tears. With no money to pay the balance he was humiliated. “We have to stop. I can’t let you see me like this.” Fear of collapse returned more intensely than before. Our usual

transaction could no longer evacuate shame or retain his omnipotence.

Need for flight returned to full consciousness. I tried pointing out our crisis was financial and emotional. “You told me your secret wish for me to take care of you and your secret fear that I won’t and will send you away.” With both eyes closed and face turned away, Aaron was already preparing to leave and didn’t seem to hear me. Unsettled by intense and prolonged silence, one of Aaron’s most disturbing phantoms, I felt an urgent need to speak and suggested decreasing to one session a week. Threatened with a new episode of travel fever, Aaron was unable to speak at all.

But now, wish for flight conflicted with a new, measurable wish to stay. Deepened attachment created a space that provided the courage to stay and begin confronting fear of limited financial resources and shameful family identification. His lip trembling, he admitted, “I am my father.” He was thinking of a bankrupt theater director; I was still thinking of a Jewish boy running in the night hungry and scared somewhere in North Africa.

It was another moment of profound uncertainty, not knowing if the treatment would survive or if I understood what was happening well enough to put it in meaningful words. Looking back, hard-earned improvement in analysis contributed to this significant shift. Capacity to experience vulnerability, fear, and desire toward me increased tolerance for troubling ghosts in his internal world. Despite fear of slowing down, Aaron chose to stay without resorting to flight. Improvement left him vulnerable. Ghosts came into his mind, ready to flood it with helplessness and shame. He couldn’t avoid them any longer.

Losing the second session shook the frame again, and this time Aaron too. First, he tried replacing it with more postcards and reviews that piled up in my office and inbox, assuring me of his affection and ensuring I wouldn’t forget him. Aaron didn’t want to explore their meaning, and with his sense of control restored he balked. “I can’t put it all into words and besides there isn’t enough time anyway.” I registered his need to avoid further exposure and vulnerability with me. His second attempt involved his bastion more directly. He insisted I see his work and, about two years into treatment, I agreed, on the condition we talk about it afterwards.

In one performance, flight from a rejecting other shifted to connection with a containing one. Two characters inhabited a dream world but were ultimately cut off from one another. I registered frustration and despair. At one point the male character, played by Aaron, was so agitated he began punching the walls. With the set crumbling, a Stranger entered and they began picking up the pieces together. I held my breath, watching characters perform the collapse and frustration we had experienced, contained, and survived a few months earlier. Aaron had internalized new experiences with me and was expressing them in his own language on

stage.

In the next session, Aaron took control right away. He wasn't interested in discussing content. He focused on his careful decision of where to seat me so he could watch me watch him. Seeing and being seen returned. If he couldn't come inside my house, he succeeded in bringing me into his. He wanted me to see feelings inside him he couldn't see himself. In the dark, womblike atmosphere of the theater, his transference wish for my omniscience felt maternal. We were enacting our own version of distraught infant and attuned caregiver. He needed me to contain, transform, and reflect his disorganizing experience, which was internal, into a form that was more manageable—representation with words. Now, when I told him what I saw he didn't turn away. He took it in, eyes wide open. Aaron was experiencing another shift from using me as receptacle for evacuated negative affect to using me as an emotionally engaged witness. Expanding the frame beyond the Internet to include theater deepened analysis even further.

In a way, we were creating a new live third. Prior struggle with words was shifting too as we started thinking about shared experience in the theater and creating new space for reflection. Aaron even began asking for help finding the words to express his feelings. Most importantly, we were doing it at a safer distance on his terms, using the Internet or stage, with me as witness in the audience. I was "becoming the analyst" he needed "unobtrusive and relational," "flexible and responsive," (Grossmark 2012). By letting Aaron set the scene, I became deeply immersed in his internal world, as he experienced it, in place of assumption. Through a largely physical language, we were starting to acknowledge the internal gap that let him feel more in control and more comfortable revealing himself in a language he spoke fluently and which I was learning to recognize and understand.

Internalizing me as meaning maker, Aaron elaborated conflict between intimacy and intrusion through spectral enactment in a dark theater. It reminded me of a subterranean pool of unconscious wishes and fears, and a growing capacity to internalize me as protective lifeguard. Expanding the search for words to express feelings and create meaning could be a matter of life or death.

Fully translating experience into words remained secondary to having a witnessing other, who was engaged and survived, but didn't rush to verbalize or symbolize at a deeper psychic level (Reis 2009). I was unsure Aaron was ready to tolerate any interpretation, let alone one where, both he and I were important. In another performance a boy is rescued when friends throw him a rope. He automatically dismissed my words; he was trying to tell me something about his childhood. "I'm talking about Childhood not my

childhood.” I yielded to his correction, though not without noticing he was talking about any childhood. More importantly, he had replaced barbed wire that kills with supple rope that saves.

Soon after, I learned this performance did have roots in Aaron’s childhood, even though he didn’t consciously connect them. He was swimming in a lake with his brothers and one of them nearly drowned. When I asked about the resemblance between that memory and his performance he was puzzled. When he dismissed me this time it was only partially. He insisted his performance had no connection with his emotional internal world at the same time insisting, “it’s all in my work, that’s why you have to see it.” My life-saving presence was more useful seen not heard. In fact, silent witnessing was the role he cast me to play. I understood we were preparing for return of his childhood ghosts, which would appear for us to see but not comment on. Still struggling with language, struggle with one another was safely contained.

And soon narrative appeared. Aaron took his work in a new direction, drawing on themes of war, dislocation, and exile, which turned passive to active and linked him to a heroic traumatic past. To do this he reached beyond the personal and paternal past, which were shameful, to a mythic past of classical antiquity. Putting his own stamp on these myths he reversed roles and had sons rescue fathers. Still needing me as silent witness, Aaron brought the entire production to life in session, his need for omnipotent, exhibitionistic, and seductive control in full force. No element was left out, from characters to set design to lighting. It was especially important I know the young hero was also father to a son of his own. Reversal also let him identify with me as longed-for father from his dream and gratify his wish for self-repair by making himself an active rescuer, no longer passive victim of a telescoped traumatic past.

But myth isn’t life and life isn’t simple. On my way to the theater, Aaron called in a panic. A pipe had burst in the ceiling and water was flooding the stage. His soft controlled voice starkly contrasted with his alarming fear that water would wash out the entire production, destroying everything he had worked for. Flood in New York, air raid in North Africa, round up in Central Europe. When news came that they had fixed the leak, Aaron was still afraid it wouldn’t hold, it wasn’t safe to go on. He didn’t know what to do and fell silent at the other end. He was finally waiting for me to speak. Fighting off my own shock and numbness, I searched my mind for something hopeful and from somewhere I said, “It sounds like you have what you need.”

Words were secondary to attachment. Reis (2009) describes how “the other who can receive this experience (the nonverbal traumatic repetition) is the analyst, whose affective presence within the relationship with the

patient, creates the condition for mutual experiencing of that which exists outside speech.” For me, that moment on a winter night outside a theater talking by cell phone about a threatening flood was a mutual experience in which we were deeply immersed, without the words to adequately capture it. There was only the doing, and in the doing discovering trust and hope. Experiencing and witnessing that moment together would help us find the words to sort out the meaning later.

Then I saw a transcendent piece of work, deeply moving and well deserving of the critical praise it received. After the performance, Aaron quickly brought me onstage wanting me to see everything he saw, the pipe, the hole, where the water fell, and the damage that was done. It felt physical and also verbal. I felt how close to me he stood and heard his words describing the performance, thanking me again and again. I imagined an embrace, between proud, grateful son and admired, admiring father. In a way, we could have exchanged roles. Each of us knew something about fathers and sons, rescue and need to be rescued. We were still enacting the repair of a traumatic relationship with a father, something Aaron wasn't ready to analyze, at least not yet.

Ghost stories

In order to help the subject recover the ghost story, the analyst must be familiar with his own. Revisiting and coming to new terms with a ghostly past I considered worked through long ago was activated by my impasse with Aaron. Psychic reorganization of remembered and recently discovered trauma helped me become less obtrusive, remain deeply engaged, and, whenever possible, let Aaron decide how best to use me. Avoiding the rush to translate enactment into word, I became more comfortable immersed for longer periods of time in powerful, not yet symbolized experience. Another way of describing that is my evolution toward becoming a more relational analyst, whose containing and witnessing mind recovers more quickly from unavoidable cracks and who recognizes a ghost story when he hears one.

Translating a ghost story into a more workable form requires the analyst to develop fluency in its uniquely spectral language, a language that extends beyond verbal, physical, and uncanny moments in transference-countertransference to include a more nuanced vocabulary of enactment and disturbance in frame. Enactment may repeat in form but shift in meaning or function over time. Those initially intended to ward off contact, may facilitate intimacy later. Finally, understanding the meaning of alterations in frame is essential, when it is under attack or when it becomes more settled. The possibility for psychic transformation increases when analyst and analysand begin understanding each other's subjectivity

and the meaning of each one's particular ghost language. Recently, Aaron called from Europe with a new dream. "You were walking around Paris, buying food. I'm following you but you don't see me and I'm looking in garbage cans for boxes of pizza." "I guess I'm still looking for scraps," Aaron admitted. "I'm jealous, but it's a little different. I look up to you, you can afford to buy your own food." Now we're laughing together. No longer lost or alone, more open to acknowledging hunger on many levels, Aaron is finally slowing down enough to begin thinking about ghost stories. Acknowledging the work that lies ahead to analyze and understand hidden meaning, in words rather than action, he hopes to work together for a long time. So do I.

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