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RECOLLECTING THE VANISHING FORMS OF 9/11: TWENTY YEARS OF RUPTURES, RIPPLES, AND REFLECTIONS

BILLIE A. PIVNICK, PhD

The events of 9/11 have been vanishing from memories. Yet it was a pivotal event in world history and in many families' individual life cycles. Enduring losses and ruptures have rippled into both intensely personal moments and our sociopolitical processes. We vowed initially never to forget. But the problem we faced in the aftermath of the terrifying attacks became how best to remember. Twenty years later the author reflects on those historical events from her perspective as the Consulting Psychologist to Thinc Design, the exhibition design team for the National September 11 Memorial Museum. Using now her senses attuned to the 9/11 trauma narrative and its effects on group processes, as well as her habit of thinking about memory as multi-directional dialogue among disparate-in-time meanings, she attempts to locate 9/11 in a historical constellation with Hiroshima, the War on Terror, Latin American 9/11, COVID, Black Lives Matter, dissociated grief and grievance, and the 1/6 US Capital Insurrection.

Keywords: 9/11, memorialization, historical trauma, multi-directional memory, group incohesion

The events of 9/11 have been vanishing from memories. Yet it was a pivotal event in world history and in many families' individual life cycles. So many losses and ruptures have endured – rippling into both intensely personal moments and our sociopolitical processes. Initially we vowed never to forget. But the problem we faced in the aftermath of the terrifying attacks soon became how best to remember.

Twenty years later I reflect on those historical events from my perspective as the Consulting Psychologist to Thinc Design, the exhibition design team for the National September 11 Memorial Museum. The museum was designed to help us remember and grieve lives lost in, during, and after the terror attacks of 1993 and 2001 at the former World Trade Center, in the Pentagon, and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. At the same time, it was meant to honor the site, considered by many to be sacred. Continuing to bear witness to the devastation caused by the events intended to create suffering, undermine beliefs, and break up communities reaffirms that we value the dignity of human life, as well as an end to ignorance, hatred, and intolerance (Pivnick, 2011).

Using now my senses attuned to the 9/11 trauma narrative and its effects on group processes, as well as my habit of thinking about memory as multi-directional dialogue among disparate-in-time meanings (Rothberg, 2009), I attempt to locate 9/11 in

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history. In doing so I use Freud's (1920/1955) concept of *nachtraglichkeit*, the ways the past is re-inscribed in the present and the present rewrites the past. In this spirit, I also draw on the future-orientation inherent in the prophetic aspect of a psychoanalyst's role (Cortina & Maccoby, 1996; Fromm, 1976) to better understand the effects of the social and cultural on psychic reality (Layton, 2019). Additionally, new understandings derived from community psychoanalysis inform my revised understanding of a psychoanalyst's role in such a memorial and historical project (Bermudez, 2019; Gonzalez, 2020).

A Sky's Eye View of Some Ripples of 9/11

Before sitting down to write, I took a walk. It was a lovely May day, with sunny reflections glinting off shiny windows. Looking up at the cerulean sky, I saw two silver airplanes gliding overhead. I felt happy to be alive. Wow, I mused, the backdrop to this morning is "9/11 blue" and there's not a cloud in the sky. But it was not 9/11; these were not weaponized planes; and I was not on my way to work. Instead, it was my first maskless walk after the Pandemic lockdown and joy was in the air. I noticed the similarity to my 9/11 morning mainly because of the absent echo of foreboding in my first impressions.

If memory is the past made present, as Rothberg (2009) holds, my morning walk repeated a morning trek of some 20 years ago, but this time seasoned with mourning. I was remembering a disaster of catastrophic proportions that was foreshadowed that early morning in 2001 by my disappointment over the ripping of my sandals in such a way that I could barely hobble to my office. Like that daybreak walk of decades ago, when I took my eyes off the skies to cast them suddenly downward, I nearly lost my balance. I was reminded of the iconic 9/11 "Falling Man" photo.

Memory, I knew, affects the future, too. Just at the moment I nearly fell, I was transported to a date some 10 or 15 years hence in which I may be a doddering old matron. What sort of world would this elderly version of me be living in? Would there be blue skies anymore, or just orange ones? Would the sun feel pleasantly warm or relentlessly searing? If my trove of spring memories were any guide, I needn't worry. But what if our government did not protect us from the changing climate? More importantly, what if we did not protect our government from anti-democratic forces?

But wait, how did I take that sudden u-turn into fear on this joyous maskless day in 2021 Brooklyn? Then I remembered the TV images I had seen earlier that morning of the bombings in Gaza and the hand-to-hand street fighting between hopelessly polarized ethnic groups in Israel, and more surprisingly, similar violent combat between Muslims and Jews in Times Square. The reverberations of 9/11 were careening in all directions.

Political Polarization

So much collapsed on "9/11," including the meanings denoted by the name (Pivnick, 2015a; Pivnick & Hennes, 2014). The popular shorthand for the massive catastrophe of

that day condensed in nightmare images that manifested in tangled but distinct physical, symbolic, narrative, temporal, and intersubjective collapses. What visibly collapsed on 9/11 were buildings, symbols, defensive systems, and response. But what also collapsed was society's capacity for reasoned dialogue and tolerance of views that dissented from a rapidly coalescing narrative of outrage and inchoate revenge. And for many, what also collapsed was the ability to symbolize what had happened. As the emotions evoked by the events were transmuted into retaliation, re-energized defenses, and sometimes paralytic fear of repetition, time also collapsed the distinction between present, past, and future. These kinds of responses, in turn, collapsed for some their ability to engage an alive interplay with others' ideas and emotions. Only afterward did it become apparent—at least to psychoanalysts—that our ability to narrate our collective and individual losses was hindered by numerous gaps in our understanding, precipitated in large measure by our dislocation in time. The relational remnant of reality that remained was polarized almost beyond recognition. Our democratic processes, so dependent on ethical mutuality and reciprocity, ground to a deadlocked standstill. Could we still stand? For what?

Ezra Klein's (2020) book on why the US is polarized does not mention 9/11. Yet even as we began our work of memorializing these events, some five years after September 11, 2001, U.S. politics had become so polarized as to jeopardize our country's democratic functioning. While there were many explanations for our political impasse, one of them certainly was the effect of mass catastrophic trauma on our ability to express and regulate ourselves. Psychoanalysts understood that political systems could be severely endangered by the resulting break in a community's memories (Kafka, 2008). When trying to remember the past without examining what had been unconsciously omitted or overemphasized, memory conservation could be hijacked to serve demagogic purposes. Through gathering together collective memory, memorialization makes the absent present enough to be mourned, and makes what is present absent enough to be remembered symbolically. As a group endeavor that produces shared memory out of many individual shards, memorialization had to accompany representational storytelling in order to repair the severed link between the psychic and the social (Bernstein, 2000; Margalit, 2002; Pivnick, 2011). Only with an intact *social link* could we bear witness to one another's suffering and create a coherent enough historical narrative to bind our country back together (Davoine & Gaudillière, 2004).

The Role of a Community Psychoanalyst

Community psychoanalysts work outside the consulting room and sometimes apply psychoanalytic theories and methods to the communities themselves (Bermudez, 2019). In 2006, I was hired by Tom Hennes, Thinc's Design Principal, to assist with memorializing the massive number of losses, to monitor the potential visitor experience for the many millions of people expected to visit, and to help minimize the distortions

created by traumatic processes on the museum's storytelling. As a community psychoanalyst who carefully traced this country's trauma narrative after 9/11, my role positioned me to closely follow the multiple storylines that contributed to the history of that fateful day. I am perhaps more aware than many of the ways that traumatic remembrances and their accompanying anxieties—condensed as if in a dream—repeated as we tried to assemble narratives and artifacts so they could be understood and mastered: attack/intrusion, collapse, fright, anger, rescue, and the new but never-ending presence of absence. In fact, like a compulsive puzzler, I have continued to try to fit together polarized historical fragments. I still see the echoes of the many stories of survivors, family members, and community stakeholders—as well as the ways that certain images rhymed with one another.

For me, as for many, 9/11 is still a story without closure. That is by design: although the designers and I had hoped to provide a “relational home” (Stolorow, 2011) to contain much of the uncontained affect, we discovered how porous the museum actually was.¹ We creatively used spatial parameters to uncollapse temporal confusion; we designed a memorial exhibition that paradoxically contained memories of both *the one* and *the many*; we translated enactments of overwhelming *cut-away* affective impressions into narratives; we designed a journey that took visitors experientially from the absence of presence to the presence of absence; we designed exhibits to be interactive and intersubjective to assure dialogue could take place. Yet even as we worked to uncollapse a condensed memory or storyline, we discovered that someone or something else would re-collapse it. Finally, I concluded that when reflecting on encounters with the “wounds of history” (Salberg & Grand, 2016) containment of existential anxiety is needed but so is what Bromberg (1996) calls “standing in the spaces.” Only a container with gaps formed by alternating presence and absence in rhythmically-formed connections permits enactment of the transformational dynamics so necessary to change—cycling between dismantling established forms and creating absence; and constructing new forms as a presence—reminding ourselves that all structures both appear and disappear (Hagman, 2016; Pivnick, 2017). Home, after all, as W. H. Auden (1959) tells us, is “a place we may go both in and out of.” Like the world, it is always a work in progress.

Writing the Disaster

“The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact. It does not touch anyone in particular, I am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside. It is in this way that I am threatened; it is in this way that the disaster threatens in me that which is exterior to me—an other than I who passively become other.” ~Maurice Blanchot (1980)

¹For more complete descriptions of the 9/11 memorialization project, please refer to (Pivnick, 2011, 2013, 2015a, &, 2017, 2018) as well as to (Pivnick & Hennes, 2014).

In order to contextualize my response to the disaster, I will share a few details of my personal connection to 9/11 history. On the morning of 9/11, my two sons saw through their school's windows the planes hit the towers. To help them reverse their sense of helplessness, I signed us up to bake cookies to fund new turnout gear for the under-equipped firefighters. In the wee hours of a morning a few days after 9/11, I was called by a Brooklyn firehouse who had seen my name and profession on the list of moms; they hoped I could provide support for a suicidal, wheelchair-bound brother of one of the eight deceased firefighters from that house. Of course, I responded with a visit; he and I spoke (and wept) together for many hours until he was able to pull himself together. I advised the surviving firefighters to put him to work on "the pile" later that morning, so he—like they—could cope by "turning passive into active." In subsequent visits to the firehouse, my young sons accompanied me, bringing home-baked brownies and jokes, and "imprinted" on these men and their heroic actions. Some of the men, in turn, attended my older son's Bar Mitzvah. Not coincidentally, in 2011 my eldest son joined the US Army National Guard, eventually doing full time active duty on a Counterterrorism Task Force in NYC; my younger son became an EMT. In 2020, my soldier son, who faced danger on a daily basis, was assaulted in the earliest hours of the COVID-19 lockdown. Ten days later he had a craniotomy to stop subdural bleeding. But of course, by then our hospital system was in collapse. This hospital was also the epicenter of a newly emerging COVID-19 "hotspot," so we were not allowed to be with him after the surgery; nor could he receive the usual follow-up care with a physician. Because he suffered seizures while convalescing at home, a kind and brave young PA did a quick consult with us on the street outside the hospital while a dead body in a red body bag was wheeled by on a stretcher. Soon after, my son had to have part of his skull removed due to an abscess, as well as a third surgery to replace his skull bone. We suffered twin terrors—the devolving COVID pandemic and a devolving cranium. Together with my museum consultation these comprise one family history of intertwined trauma and reparation—now witnessed.

Writing History

Historical stories that commemorate traumatic events are so affected by collapsed symbolization that they can prevent mourning (Felman & Laub, 1991). Relational psychoanalysis understands that this inability to symbolize usually manifests as binary thinking that leads to increasing conflict and power struggles, and keeps wounds raw. Given the traumatic context of much of what is memorable enough to be transmitted to future generations, the conventional historical chronicle is so distorted that it must be understood as emerging from multiple partial views that can only gradually be brought together (Blanchot, 1980; Caruth, 1996; Margalit, 2002). In a memorial museum, the narrative can emerge in nonlinear fashion as sounds, story strands, and images. Together these threads form an important record from which present and future members of society can weave evolving texts (Beebe et al., 2013; Greenwald, 2010; Halbwachs, 1941). Since most designers do not have the

tools for translating traumatic emotion and loss to facilitate memorialization, the psychoanalytic consultant's role in such a memorial project resembles that of a poet (Pivnick, 2018).² I want to focus today particularly on re-envisioning the disaster's meanings in light of what we now know, with attention to the ways our own feelings, memories, implicate us in its continuing unfolding.

POST-9/11 TEMPORALITY

As a psychoanalytic consultant, I was well aware that trauma's most significant victim was time. To my surprise, the collapse of time in trauma even affected our experience of the seemingly mute artifacts. During Thinc's first visit to the JFK airport hangar that contained most of the artifacts. The conservator of these objects greeted us by saying, "This will not be your first visit" I assumed he meant, "This will not be your last visit" since most of us were there for the first time. I mused that the narrative pancaking pointed to by his confusion of temporal terms could, if opened, become a space where we would see history emerging—and where the emergent story of National September/11 would commence, scaffolded in now-wounded steel that articulated a story devoid of peopled verbs.

The conservator's communication gaffe reflected what Freud, (1920/1955, p. 61) called "a break in the mind's experience of time." He saw this temporal discontinuity as more disruptive to a person's defenses than an actual escape from severe danger in traumatic situations. Usually, the action of *nachtraglichkeit*, or retranscription, would attempt to restore continuity through compulsive repetition. Through a delayed action, Lacan's "*apres coup*," the effects of trauma would be deferred to a later time (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967). Enacted repetitions, however painful and unanticipated, could bridge those temporal gaps through action. Since actions can reveal which emotions need translation into linguistic links, telling stories that depicted those actions to others could help reintegrate procedural and semantic memory and prevent repeated disruptions. Freud, (1914/1950) called this process "repeating, remembering, and working through." Attending to the effects of enactments on communication could also help reestablish severed social links among people and institutions (Davoine & Gaudillière, 2004). Many of those enactments happened in the design team as we worked together to create a coherent narrative from multiple fragments.

HISTORICAL TRAUMA

Nations traumatized by mass catastrophe, like traumatized individuals, suffer grievous loss of the ability to comprehend the enormity of what and who was lost. This results,

²I took as my consultation model that of George Moraitis (1979) who saw his role as a psychoanalyst to historians as observing, reading, and thinking about the materials he was offered while refraining from personality interpretations. Although he engaged in dialogue with historians in order to help him clarify their positions, he often held in mind disavowed feelings until they could be better integrated. The consultant him/herself becomes the laboratory for processing the material.

in part, from binary thinking in both their leaders and citizens. After a mass traumatic event like war or foreign incursion, the world looks either good or bad, black or white, but rarely both at once because the ability to hold mixed feelings is one of the capacities that is knocked out by traumatic levels of terror (Pivnick, 2011, 2013, 2015a, 2017). When thinking is reduced to polarities and losses cannot be mourned, a large group, like an individual, is vulnerable to repeating compulsively what is not remembered and represented symbolically (Volkan, 2013). When members of society take in dissociated but enacted trauma, it can also be transmitted transgenerationally (Davoine & Gaudillière, 2004; Salberg & Grand, 2016; Vaughans, 2017)

Post-traumatic fracturing into good-bad polarized thinking also influences how smaller groups function (Hopper, 2003). Specifically, traumatized helplessness induces group incohesion, leaving groups without the capacity to function harmoniously, solve problems, or relate to leaders in a way that results in the completion of tasks or the protection and empowerment of members. In incohesive groups, members either form into large masses (such as large political rallies in which the crowd can merge with a charismatic leader) or aggregates (like groups of emotionally disconnected individuals walking on city streets or like lone-wolf terrorists united only tangentially). The give-and-take even among members of high functioning groups also diminishes, so solutions are poorly conceived. The frequency of breakdowns of understanding due to binaries in the memorial design team's thinking mirrored our society's fragmented, dysfunctional state after 9/11 when the aftermath of the attacks magnified already existing political divisions. Although we could address incohesive dynamics in our intra-team and inter-team behavior, our processing had an understandably limited effect on the world at large.

In the larger social context, the polarized dynamics were reflected in violence against Muslims, and in the immediate contestation of the location of a neighboring Muslim community center near the National September 11 Memorial and Museum as well as many features of our intended design. Regular conversations with stakeholders led to a Memorial Exhibition design that both incorporated some families' wish that we convey the enormity of what was lost and others' desire that we provide a sanctum within a sanctum within a sanctum so they could mourn in a protected space. Although we generally functioned collaboratively, sometimes Hennes, and myself enacted oppositions—like the feeling that one of us was too present and nearby on 9/11 and the other one too absent because of air travel restrictions. Intersubjective “doer-done to” dynamics (Benjamin, 2004) were also enacted by us in the final writing about the project, where we jostled about whose voice should dominate until we understood the way we had split our feelings about ending so that instead of both of our perspectives being dignified, it seemed for a time as though *only one voice could speak*. Benjamin's (2014) extension of her work on intersubjectivity to a more global formulation showed us that our interactions reflected the dynamics of the world we were trying to portray, in which some people were more privileged and empowered than others and had been

for generations. These power dynamics were apparent in Trump's 2016 election and are even more apparent today as they roil the world, become magnified by social media, and are exploited to foment political mistrust.

Constellations

Philosopher Walter Benjamin (2019/1968) perhaps had Freud's thinking in mind when he asserted that a good historian "... stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary ... and grasps the constellation which [one's] own era has formed with a definite earlier one" with the past erupting in the present precisely when there is danger (Brand, 2020). Twenty years later, the many nodes in dialogue with the 9/11 story include Hiroshima, the War on Terror, Latin American 9/11 (referring to the 1973 military coup in Chile which initiated a reign of state terror), COVID, Black Lives Matter, dissociated grief and grievance, and the 1/6 US Capital Insurrection.

HIROSHIMA

One node of the 9/11 sociopolitical constellation includes the event's uncanny aesthetic and political resonance with Hiroshima (Bousquet, 2006). Both were violent acts that created major ruptures in the Western world's historical narratives and were perceived as world-changing moments. Apocalyptic smoky images overwhelmed our minds' capacities to create meaning. Instead, the clouds of each explosion played over and over an image of such destruction that life afterward was felt to proceed not just from Ground Zero but from Time Zero. The re-use in 2001 of the 1945 term Ground Zero suggested it too formed a constellation with that earlier time. That the repeated TV footage symbolized indiscriminate mass murder made it an ideal messaging tool for both terrorists and state actors. When viewed through that lens, it is easier to understand other countries' perception of the US as a state that employs terror on others' soil. When one ceases to view these events chronologically and instead to read their esthetic effects, one perceives their similar evocation of awe and terror too enormous for contemporary political contexts to contain. The "shock and awe" attack on Iraq in retaliation for 9/11 is a clear example.

WAR ON TERROR

After 9/11, the US was at a loss. Many from around the world came to our aid, forging new bonds of friendship and solidarity. But viewed as intolerable victimhood, our helplessness after the attacks on 9/11 was seized upon by the neo-conservative government of George Bush and reversed into an excuse to go to war against foreign enemies and also against many democratic institutions and civil liberties guaranteed by our constitution. Inflaming the fear response already extent in the body politic, the Republican administration reinterpreted caring as surveilling. Similarly, the government re-construed enhancing economic vitality as "going shopping" and investing in

bloated military budgets. And then they rushed to war, leaving the caring aside. Uncertainty about the future allowed some citizens to oppose this authoritarian rightward swing, permitting antiwar protests to arise.

In a parallel process, one of our suggested museum storylines related to the caring of other countries for our citizens, and our caring for one another. But when we also included in our proposed exhibits images of some citizens expressing disapproval of the government for not responding sooner and with anger at our rush to war, our work began to stand in some tension to the national narrative being constructed by the Bush administration and the neo-conservative foreign policy establishment to justify their rush to war in the Mideast. The exhibition designers and the curators began developing competing narratives, with the one about our triumphant mastery over our vulnerability through the War on Terror winning the day. It was, after all, a national museum. Caring and aggression became more difficult to hold together; instead there emerged an emphasis on patriotic national unity. Although the splitting among the teams reflected contesting views of neo-conservative policies, both teams now regarded one another with some distrust. Another designer was brought in to realign the narrative toward a less ambivalent stance, in keeping with the direction that the Museum had gone.

LATIN AMERICAN 9/11

The history of US involvement in the Mideast after 9/11 is well described by Nancy Hollander in her 2010 book, *Uprooted Minds*, in which she reminds us that “9/11” in Latin America refers to a different historical event, the anniversary of the 1973 coup in Chile, which has signified the military imposition of political authoritarianism and neo-liberal economic ideology. If followed, a dialogue with this memory of 9/11 can take us in a direction that is increasingly relevant to the attack on our own democracy, since our politics have lurched even further rightward toward authoritarianism under Trump and the Republicans. Can we mourn our destructive involvement in Latin American terror? Looking backwards, then, takes us to our present reality of post-insurrection politics and at least one potential future narrative. Are the echoes of 9/11 to be found going forward in authoritarian state terror? I will return to this question. One positive note is that in the fall of 2020, Chile responded to several years of political protest by voting out their authoritarian government and giving a mandate for rewriting their constitution in a manner that is more egalitarian and inclusive of even impoverished citizens.

COVID-19

That COVID-19 is a node in the 9/11 constellation of events is evidenced by the fact that so often the statistics cited in the news were expressed in multiples of 3,000, the approximate number of those killed on 9/11. COVID-19’s unequal targeting of people of color acted as a racialized amplifier of fear and grief that was already lurking in our

social spaces. National traumas, like individual traumatic events, can re-stimulate behaviors and beliefs more appropriate to older traumas, like the racialized polarization that led to the Civil War. Vamik Volkan (2003) calls these nationally-held traumas “*chosen traumas*.” They become the nexus of rallying cries and ideologies for opposing groups who were wounded by extreme powerlessness during those mass events. He considers the US Civil War our own “chosen trauma” and psychologically-hardened racial divisions its legacy. Trump’s delay in addressing the health crisis was felt by many as murderous, especially to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) groups. Can honoring and caring for our many dead reclaim our ability to care for one another across our social divides? Our collective difficulty with mourning has a long history and is rooted in numerous historical traumas we have not been able to face—going back even to our founding. By memorializing COVID-19 victims as one of his first acts, and by trying to elevate and valorize concern for others, President Biden is trying to bring recognition to acts of caregiving. Freud (1927/1961) stressed the human need to elevate loving over destructiveness. Can Biden bring life-giving activities and death-dealing actions more into balance (Blass, 2020)? Not just our health, but our social links depend on his success. In an echo of 9/11, our human struggle to overcome death anxiety through caring has implicated us not just as victims and witnesses, but also motivated us to take action to reverse ruthless carelessness (Rothberg, 2019; Swartz, 2019).

BLACK LIVES MATTER

The murder of George Floyd was a moment so pivotal, horrifying, prolonged, public, and repeated, that it is hard not to see it as part of the constellation of historical events that owe some of their provenance to 9/11. From increased militarization of the police and continuing racialization of our interactions with one another, the conditions for such carnage and public witnessing proliferated after 9/11 are like dry undergrowth for a conflagration. Understandable grief and outrage exploded, taking massive numbers of citizens, both black and white, into the streets in protest. The candlelight vigils harked back to similar vigils after 9/11, but true mourning still awaits. Nonetheless, the prospect of unifying through love and understanding was powerful enough to gain the attention of voters who voted out the Trump administration.

Led by the Black Lives Matter movement we have continued to protest the losses of so many BIPOC lives to police brutality, yet we have barely begun to mourn the truly unthinkable number (nearly 500,000 as of this writing) of mostly BIPOC “essential workers,” and elderly people who have died of COVID-19, or the nearly uncountable number of others who have suffered death at the hands of oppressors since this country’s founding. In echoes of 9/11, do the protests reveal unbearable fear and sadness? The indelible images of funeral-like processions reverberate in our culture through such theatrical works as *Afterwardness*, choreographed by Bill T. Jones (cf., Pivnick & Reading, 2020).

ADDRESSING GRIEVANCE ALONG WITH GRIEF

This comeback of caring constitutes a ripple of influence from 9/11. But so does the racialization of the narrative. Both Blacks and whites have suffered unnecessary deaths—some sudden and shocking, like those from COVID-19, some unfolding over such extended periods that we barely notice them. In both circumstances, the systemic neglect or retaliatory abuse by those with more privilege or authority—police, policymakers, politicians, and the moneyed interests behind them—leave anguished survivors viewing their loved ones' deaths as not just deliberate but unforgivable. Since challenged authoritarians attempt to stay in power by creating racialized divisions, cessation of blaming one another to focus instead on the system that produces a government that eschews protecting its citizens would be in order. One way to do this is to acknowledge our mutual vulnerability through mourning together (Butler, 2020).

Although many might find it surprising, I believe we must also engage in national mourning for the hundreds of thousands of deaths (mostly young, white, male, and thought-to-be-inessential workers) from the opiate epidemic—the public health emergency we were aware of before COVID-19 arrived on our shores. Why? This must be done to address the binary thinking that characterizes our traumatized politics, not because of any intent to attribute moral equivalence. White supremacist beliefs, violence, and murder are reprehensible and represent the de-symbolization of our cultural discourse. But if we are to function more cohesively, we must mourn the massive losses on both sides of the racialized political divide.

As of February 2021, statistics show that opiate-induced deaths constitute a nearly equal number to those resulting from COVID-19. The recent settlement of the Purdue Pharma case reminds us that just because beliefs appear delusional or greatly distorted, doesn't mean they did not emerge from a grain of truth. During the opiate epidemic, innocent people did suffer at the hands of malignant profiteering decision-makers with little stake in the communities of those who died. Has the country witnessed the pain of either group sufficiently help the bereaved feel contained? No, because their lives are felt to be ungrievable, that is, lives that haven't been counted as lived (Butler, 2016). That both urban Blacks and rural whites are so demeaned makes their erasure a statement more about the body politic than about the worth of individual lives.

During Thinc's National September 11 Memorial Museum team meetings, I often observed the designers unconsciously enact various aspects of the traumatic memories of 9/11, which had been dissociated because the emotions stimulated were intolerable. When understood, the unprocessed moments of unbearable affect could be rendered by us into words and inserted into the verbal curatorial narrative that would ultimately organize and choreograph the sequence of exhibits. *One affective phenomenon that was never translated for inclusion in the museum was the collapse in faith in our institutions expressed by some who felt unprotected by our government, which had responded*

too little, too late to warnings of attacks. Although we argued for the inclusion of multiple, even contradictory narratives, which were often accepted, in this instance, the story of some portion of the citizenry feeling betrayed by the government was not narrativized. It is axiomatic to psychologists that trauma, if not remembered, is reenacted. So it is uncanny, but not coincidental, that managing the COVID-19 disaster requires acknowledging that our government's neglect resulted in the unnecessary deaths of many citizens. So many that a majority of citizens rose up to elect a competent and less polarizing manager as President. Will contestation of that narrative finally reduce our democracy to rubble or can we unite? This brings me to the Insurrection.

THE 1/6 INSURRECTION AT THE US CAPITAL

Horror now twins terror as part of our national mood. The insurrection at the US Capital during the congressional certification of the 2020 US presidential election forms yet another node in the constellation of inconceivable conflagrations. Once again, images depict an attack on US soil, meant to disrupt a US structure both functional and iconic in nature- a clash between two belief systems that seems as if it can only end with unimaginable destruction or the collapse of one of the combatants. Many in the global audience felt as though they were watching a re-run of traumatic aspects of the Revolution, the Civil War, post-Vietnam, Afghanistan, or Iraq Wars, the Civil Rights movement, and 9/11 all at once. Some citizens wondered if the seditious attack on the integrity of the US elections would come to justify fraudulent new procedures for elections much as the 9/11 attacks worked to change our geopolitical strategies from deterrence to hyper-aggressive preemptive strikes.

Viewers like myself noted both the *repetition compulsion* (Freud, 1920/1955) and that the Trump-inspired insurrectionists exhibited what psychoanalysts call *identification with the aggressor*, a common defense in traumatized people who cannot bear their powerlessness to stop a terrifying situation in which they are victimized (Ferenczi, 1988). In echoes of 9/11, these domestic terrorists used the tactics of the foreign terrorists who attacked us in 2001, an identification also displayed in Trump's complicity with the Russians' tactic in the 2016 election. The seditionists professed to be defending Trump's "Big Lie" that he did not lose the election, a common maneuver in authoritarian takeovers (Snyder, 2017). He cannot tolerate being a loser, we were told after the election he lost by over seven million votes. Suddenly, seemingly responsible people began to dissemble in the interest of winning at any cost. Were they, too, identifying with the aggressor?

The ripples are still more complex. On the one hand, complicity with such an attack found fertile ground in an already traumatically-incohesive electorate. It also took hold because many US citizens identify with his sentiment about losing. Not only are we in retreat from the Mideast, but according to some, we have basically lost every war since WWII. These losses seem to compound the bitterness of Southern whites over losing the Civil War. I contend that the *inability to tolerate being a loser* is a national

symptom growing out of our *chosen trauma*—with the feeling of *losing* denied, split, projected, identified with in the Other. Both sides claim the other will destroy our country with their losing approach. While one group wishes to assuage their grievances by vengefully triumphing—over and over—the other group advocates for winning by unifying in mutual concern for the country as they see it. It is as if we are re-litigating the Civil War, 9/11 style. In order to *manage* traumatic collapse, each side must contain mixed feelings as their own.

To reprise: the attacks of 9/11 produced the physical collapse of the buildings; the collapse of iconic symbols of our financial power; temporal collapse, as evidenced by the confusion of the meanings of current circumstances with those of the past; narrative collapse, as shown by our subsequent inability to tell a common story; and intersubjective collapse, as seen in the difficulty we have in trusting others with different viewpoints than our own lest we lose our own valued selfhood. This time the attack on our country has come from within, suggesting that our near total inability to communicate based on consensual truth has magnified collapsed intersubjectivity.

Can we can “build back better” a Moral Third based on mutual concern that helps us make room for multiple voices and many points of view? Both sides would undoubtedly agree that they feel the pain of losing. But loss of what? Citizens on both sides have suffered moral injury from being forced to participate in, witness, or allow to happen social actions which violated their moral beliefs (Shay, 2014). The 9/11 constellation shows us that the enacted cycle of attack/intrusion, collapse, fright, anger, rescue, and the need to mourn the “absence of presence” so it transforms into a more bearable “presence of absence” repeats endlessly because mourning is rarely resolved. That process is prevented by (often racialized) splitting and projective identification and continued waging of war against external enemies *when the enemy may be our own hostile masking of our own shame over how we treat one another* (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2015; Pivnick & Reading, 2021). Our internal politics threaten us because we are repeating the “discarded-dignified” dynamic of “*only one voice shall be heard*” (Benjamin, 2014; Pivnick, 2017). Since it is through feeling the other’s suffering as one’s own that traumatized people may truly begin a healing process, perhaps mourning together our many dead—counting them, naming them, carrying their weight—will create a way to witness one another’s pain and recognize it as our own (Butler, 2020; Margalit, 2002). In viewing others’ problems as ours, we begin the work of making ourselves and the world more whole. Until we can do so, perhaps we can “stand in the spaces” between our polarized positions. Without that sort of reparative “infrastructure deal” we risk remaining collapsed.

Another Sky’s Eye Siting: A Poetics of Place

Davoine and Gaudillière (2004) treat intergenerational historical trauma by finding the overlap between the analyst’s life experience and the historical experience of traumatized ancestors of the

present day traumatized patient—often initially at a purely spatial level. I was mindful of this as I encountered in 2011 the ground of Ground Zero in the under-construction space of the memorial exhibition. There, in the damaged concrete at the very bottom of what was once a soaring structure, lay a familiar shape, that of a Yin-Yang mandala. In an uncanny moment, I recalled that on the day of 9/11/2001, as I traversed the Manhattan Bridge that connected my office in Manhattan to my home in Brooklyn, I had seen a similar mandala. As the dark smoky cloud billowed overhead from the rubble in Manhattan, dispersing into a larger volume over Brooklyn, a ghostly silhouette of a sun shone through; while in the bright and gleaming water beneath the bridge, a lone black tugboat floated. It was an aesthetic experience that gave me pause while it seared itself into my memory. I was simultaneously aware that my world and an unfamiliar world across the sea were now connected in a way that was devastating, but might in some distant future yield hope, if we could find a way over time to give meaning to this destructive folly. There was no explaining this coincidental construction in rational terms. But of course, it was my apperception—a new siting for my view from the bridge (Freud, 1919/1955). My imagination had found a shelter in this non-human environment, and this architecturally-placed space now sheltered my very human imagination. I had uncannily, in this strangest of situations, found the familiar in the unfamiliar, a home in the unhomiest of places, a unifying experience that contained the chaos around and within me, and perhaps would touch visitors similarly. I realized that applying a psychoanalytic poetics of place had unquestionably contributed to our ability to envision, enlarge, and enliven spaces the world and I could now stand in (Pivnick, 2011, 2015a, 2017, 2018).

Conclusion

In the twenty years since the events of 9/11, those who reside in the US are no longer isolates but essential parts of a world community who must collaborate to solve problems. Just as this article goes to press, we witness Afghanistan falling to the Taliban and added pieces of the puzzling story of 9/11 fall into place in ways consistent with the ravages of mass trauma on community life. In this *apres-coup* moment, we can observe yet again the ways in which gaps in meaning-making arising from cascading collective traumas have disrupted our ability to respond efficiently to reality. It appears that the various groups involved in planning the exit of Americans and our Afghan allies were unable to coordinate their responsibilities in a manner that meshed their orienting beliefs with one another and with the disorienting data emerging from the current context in a timely fashion. The world is once more horrified at the chaotic outcome; once again many feel betrayed by the US government. Emblematic of the Afghans' desperation, a man jumped on a departing military transport plane only to fall to his death – in an echo of the iconic image of the so-called Falling Man who jumped in desperation from a World Trade Center tower on 9/11. Falling is portrayed in these mirror narratives as a fall from grace due to our government's lack of foresight and imagination. I argue that Falling Man has come to symbolize not just the traumatized citizen, desperate to escape feelings of

powerlessness and terror, but also our traumatized government, unable to think or collaborate well enough with others to solve problems effectively in real time. It has become clear that accepting and mourning our losses while refraining from projecting our woundedness into Others may be the only way out of an even more terrifying future. If we wish to rebuild better our capacity to manage collapse and envision a life-protective environment, grieve we must. As the world recovers from the dislocating shock of this potentially deadly denouement, I fervently hope that communal remembrance helps us connect grievance with grief and link the psychic with the social while we turn to managing the collective within – and without.

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