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Postmemory and Possession

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomena of 'postmemory' as a mode of possession that responds to experiences of suffering. As such, the hyper-connectivity it is concerned with is not that of the digitalisation of contemporary life but is rather 'vertical' hyper-connectivity indicating the disturbance of past injustices that have neither been mourned nor remedied and so keep returning to haunt the present and the future.

Postmemory and Possession

Vertical Hyper-connectivity

Hyper-connectivity comes in a variety of forms, mostly thought of in relation to technological developments that make it possible to communicate across wide spaces and to be immersed in virtually nonstop communication whether one wants it not. There is plenty of anxiety that is generated by this hyper-connectivity, ranging from the anxiety of social recognition and acceptability (possibly most pronounced amongst young people, but not confined to them) to a more general feeling of being scrutinised and subjected to surveillance at every moment of every day. I have learnt from my younger students to cover the camera of my computer whenever I use it, not because I am heavily involved in illicit or embarrassing activities whilst online, but just to bypass the sense of being watched – the hyperactive, omnipresent eye that follows us everywhere (although the act of covering the camera also draws attention to it, heightening my uncertainty about whether I am being observed). The surveillance society is real, as the ‘Surveillance Camera Players’ described in Lauren Berlant’s [5] *Cruel Optimism* dramatise, and the agitation one might feel as a response is justified. This kind of hyper-connectivity, reaching out to ever widening ripples of sociality but also subjected to an ever more pervasive security gaze, gives many of us the shivers, but others – or the same shivering ones at other times – find it reassuring. Many people welcome the ubiquitous CCTVs and indeed install them in their private property as protection; many also love the sense of linkage that hyper-connectivity gives them, putting them in touch with their diasporic cousins, their grandchildren and grandparents, those who might once have been so far away that they were effectively gone for ever but now are a continuing material presence in our lives. But anxiety is also there: being watched, having to perform, being ‘de-friended’ or blocked; being caught out.

I am very respectful of the ambiguities of this kind of thing, what we might call lateral hyper-connectivity, fully able to abhor it and celebrate it at much the same time. But in this paper I want to explore another kind of hyper-connectivity, a ‘vertical’ kind that runs across time, from one generation to another. This kind of connectivity goes under various names, ‘haunting’ being one of them. It refers to the way our present experience is saturated with echoes from past lives. These past lives are not just our own histories, though connecting with our own pasts is a significant issue, more complex than it sounds as the huge range of memory studies attests and as is evident from the vast array of Proust-inflected literature and autobiographical and memoir writing, and of course by the entire corpus of psychoanalysis. The past is very much present, we are connected in a ‘hyper’ way with it; but it is also elusive and untrustworthy, continually reinvented in the light of the present, yet also somehow formative and unendingly creative in its effects. Trauma studies is another phrase for this; indeed trauma culture is in large part defined as the inability to escape the continuing grip of the past, as well as the cultural obsession with the way certain kinds of past events seem to hold the present to account. There is also some interest in what it might mean to identify oneself as part of a ‘generation’ – another kind of connectivity – and how the politics of memory and the solidarity of certain kinds of experience relate to that identification [2]. All these forms of vertical connectivity, which we might say are means of keeping ideas and feelings *durable*, are of great significance; in many ways they fill us up as human subjects, ensuring that we live relationally, in the presence (which as Christina Sharpe [31] has shown can be thought of as ‘in the

wake') of those who have come before us. Psychoanalysis certainly seems to suggest that without these kinds of injections from the past we will be characterised by a kind of psychic emptiness, unmoored and disconnected from the forces that have shaped us into being. Connectivity with the past is simply a process of being. It may feel like we are constrained by ancestors we did not choose; it may also become melancholic as we get older and think increasingly of our losses and of the irremediability of time past; but it is also part of what is required for us to feel real. Being filled up by the ghosts can be troubling when something violent is at stake but it can also be reassuring when we feel like we do not belong anywhere and have no space we might call home.

This is all well and good, if a little sentimental; but I want to worry for a while about the notion of 'hyper' in hyper-connectivity, with its implication of something that is 'too much', and put it in relation to a specific element in the bursting of the past into the present, what has come to be called *postmemory*. This term refers specifically to the way in which experiences of past generations can come to swamp those of the present, sometimes even standing in for one's own thoughts and memories. Marianne Hirsch's [22] well-known book, *The Generation of Postmemory*, provides the definition that is needed here, emphasising how postmemory is an unwilling phenomenon of repetition that nevertheless offers an opportunity for something new to occur – some way in which the intrusive ghosts of the past might be laid reasonably to rest. I have quoted this definition before [20, pp.10-11], so will not labour it too much here (though there is an irony about trying to free oneself from repetitiousness in the context of an account of postmemory's own repetitions), but here is the how Hirsch identifies the key characteristics of postmemory:

'Postmemory' describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. [22, p.5]

There is a lot in this long definition, so let us unpack it for a while. First, it presents postmemory as a *relationship* that a later generation has to the trauma of those who came before. The nature of this relationship is peculiar: it is one that is mediated 'only' by means of stories, images and behaviours; but it is also deeply felt, *as if* members of the later generation – let us call them, for now, the children – had been through the trauma themselves. Hirsch already has a hypothesis about this: it is because the experiences were transmitted so deeply and affectively that they come to be experienced in this way; that is, it is not necessarily the experiences themselves, but the extremity and intensity of the process of transmission that matters. This makes it sound as if the children are passive in this process, yet Hirsch goes on immediately to identify the phenomenon as one of 'imaginative investment, projection, and creation' rather than 'recall'. It should be noted here that this is a slightly odd dichotomy, as recall is pretty universally acknowledged to be a cognitive process that itself is 'imaginative'. Recalling something is not, or at least not just, a matter of reproducing it

in the mind in the state one found it, but rather of re-constituting it from fragments of perception, hints and mental suggestions; it is at least half-created, which is why memory is fallible and malleable but also often pleasurable. So the contrast between 'recall' and 'imagination' does not really work. It also states the opposite of what is usually claimed about trauma, which is that it forces a literal reproduction of the event precisely because it cannot be converted into something that can be 'imagined' in a properly symbolic form. One might, then, have expected Hirsch's emphasis to have been on the fixedness of the experience that keeps recurring into later generations and blocks the active embracing of it by the children, rather than to imply that there is something more real and concrete about one's own memory compared to the postmemorial engulfment by the past.

In any event, what comes next is a shift in the account from the description of what postmemory is (or might be) to its effect on the children. Hirsch suggests that there is a 'risk', which is that growing up with such strong narratives from the past – from the period that preceded one's own existence – will result in not being able to possess one's own 'narrative'; it is 'to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors.' There is an assumption here that it is a good thing to have one's own life story and a bad thing, or at least a risk, if this story is swamped by the power of the story that has come before it, which really belongs to the previous generation. It seems that the main risks here are first that the children will not be able to distinguish their own stories from those that came before and secondly that the effects of these 'past' events will continue into the present in a debilitating or overly constraining way.

Much of Hirsch's book is devoted to distinguishing between traumatic repetition, which fixes the children in a place in which they do not belong (termed 'rememory'), and *postmemorial work*, which uses the affective resonance of postmemory to creatively restructure it. 'In the stories of transmission on which I focus in this book,' she writes [22, pp.82-3], 'I see a range between what [Toni] Morrison has called "rememory" and what I am defining as "postmemory" – between, on the one hand, a memory that, communicated through bodily symptoms, becomes a form of repetition and re-enactment, and, on the other hand, one that works through indirection and multiple mediation.' This latter form of memory allows for the possibility of a kind of repetition with change, freeing the subject from the grip of the traumatic past by allowing new work to be done, 'working through' the difficulty as psychoanalysis might name it [27]. Postmemorial work is creative work, ameliorating the trauma by owning it so that there is an actively worked 'relationship' between the children and the previous generation, not one in which this relationship is solely that of subservience, of being trapped by what has already happened. This is a very compelling argument and is filled out by Hirsch through examining photography as an artistic form that can take received images, however traumatic they might be, and do something with them to shake up the frozen repetitions that constitute the postmemory experience.

Hirsch's account is strongly supported by many second-generation testimonies that describe the experience of being overwhelmed by the power of parents' trauma, even when – or perhaps especially when – it is not openly talked about [23]. This has been discussed very fully elsewhere and I have also written about it at length [20]. I want to explore something else here, however, which is how postmemory reflects a certain kind of anxiety, the anxiety of how to become a separate person, and the relationship this has with the creation of a posttraumatic way of life, whether that is for the individual or the culture as a whole. I mean a couple of rather different things here. First, it may be

that the notion that postmemory shows the 'risk' of having one's 'own' life story displaced says something about the anxiety of owning that life story oneself. Is that a reasonable anxiety, or might it be argued that *all* our life stories are displaced, that they are never our 'own', but are also not only interconnected but 'hyper-connected', especially by those lives (and loves) that have gone before us? Secondly, it might also be that there is some dependence of postmemorial work on anxiety; that is, if it is the case that the drive to knowledge is generated by being unsettled and anxious in one's heart (another psychoanalytic thought, but also a religious one [30]), then perhaps healing at an individual and social level needs the kind of traumatised repetition underpinned by anxiety to push it into action. This is not to claim that all creativity is postmemorial, of course; but rather to suggest that the generational hyper-connectivity I have been describing is potentially a source of creative movement, including reparation for damage done, and not just inhibiting, strangling anxiety. But perhaps this is wishful thinking; we shall see.

Displacing Life Stories

I have often found myself caught in a bind about how much weight to put on narrative integrity. On one hand, schooled in a certain kind of 'narrative therapy' approach that claimed to be politically progressive as well as therapeutically effective [32], I can see the value of narratives that help us put some order into our lives and also (this is the politically progressive element) enable us to contest the narratives that others might seek to place upon us. This can happen at many levels: interpersonally (the currently fashionable term 'gaslighting' relates to this – having one's experience deliberately obliterated by an underhand and powerful other); in families, where a 'hegemonic' narrative identifying where responsibility for trouble lies might itself be the cause of that trouble and therefore need resisting and revising; socially, in relation to troubling 'discourses' that refuse recognition to certain groups and derogate some of them in racist or other discriminatory ways; even internationally, as stories about historical hurts or injustices are constructed, giving voice to some grievances and denying others their due. Contested victimhoods as well as imperialist ways of marginalising or denying the history of the oppressed all contribute to an awareness of the importance of being able to gain access to narratives that empower and enfranchise otherwise lost or occluded 'voices' and allow them to be heard [15]. This is acknowledged not only by those who actively promote narrative ways of working therapeutically and politically, for instance through post/decolonial embracing of aboriginal story-telling [4], but also those involved with truth commissions and acknowledgement projects [3] and those who, as Judith Butler expresses it [8], are interested in finding ways to enable the marginalised perspectives of the historically oppressed to 'flash up' into the present in a revolutionary way.

All this makes a lot of sense and is compelling as an argument about the counter-hegemonic resources needed for resistance to power. Therapeutically, allowing subjugated voices to be heard – for instance, ventriloquising the point of view of a child or woman in a rigidly patriarchal family, or validating the narrative of a survivor of abuse – can be strikingly powerful and emancipatory. Nevertheless, the reliance on integrated narratives, on owning one's own life story, has its underside too, which needs careful unpicking. In a paper written some time ago [18], when I was trying to disentangle myself from too much reliance on the search for integrated narratives as a mode of psychosocial research, I took a lead from the psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche to argue that making a

coherent narrative out of the messiness of experience can be seen as a *defensive* process. This quotation from Laplanche, which I have reproduced several times, has often got me thinking:

The fact that we are confronted with a possibly 'normal' and in any case inevitable defence, that the narration must be correlated with the therapeutic aspect of the treatment, in no way changes the metapsychological understanding that sees in it the guarantee and seal of repression. That is to say, that the properly 'analytic' vector, that of de-translation and the questioning of narrative structures and the ideas connected to them, remains opposed in every treatment to the reconstructive, synthesising narrative vector. [29, p.29]

This retains an important tension, although it also raises questions about what the relationship might be between 'the therapeutic aspect of the treatment' and the 'seal of repression', which I take to mean something like the opposite of analytic truth or, perhaps better, *truthfulness*. Laplanche seems to allow that producing a 'narration' might be an aspect of ('correlated with') therapeutic necessity, presumably meaning that possession of a healing narrative is an important element in feeling better. This is in line with the narrative therapy position, both outside psychoanalysis and within it, where it often takes the form of 'hermeneutics' [17]. It might also, at a stretch, be seen as congruent with relational psychoanalysis, which emphasises the power of a therapeutic relationship to help integrate fragmentary aspects of the subject's psychic life. Laplanche does not criticise this, but he frames it with what he terms the 'metapsychological understanding that sees in it the guarantee and seal of repression.' At the level of theory, then, or 'metapsychology', the 'reconstructive, synthesising narrative vector' that can make people feel better is actually a denial of psychic truth. Psychoanalysis 'properly' understood, Laplanche states, is not about this at all; instead, the 'properly "analytic" vector' is that of 'de-translation and the questioning of narrative structures and the ideas connected to them.' Psychoanalysis deals with fragments and is suspicious of the integration of experience that occurs once one is in possession of a whole narrative; it recognises instead that the actuality of the human subject is – again according to Laplanche – structured from outside through the activity of 'enigmatic signifiers' and hence cannot be forced into the shape of a narrative that anyone can fully own.

The details of Laplanche's account of the external formation of the unconscious through the enigmatic, untranslatable messages implanted in it by the other (developmentally, the mother of early infancy) are now well known and do not need repetition here [28]. If Laplanche is right, however, and if this general umbrella of externalising theory can be extended to cover Lacanians and some others, then there is a strong psychoanalytic tradition that is suspicious of the claim that anyone's 'own life story' is anything but 'displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors.' Obviously, the phenomena gathered together under the label of 'postmemory' are more specific and powerful than is the norm; they usually represent the intrusion of past generations' trauma into the lives of the 'children' and are experienced as unsettling, hard to manage, sometimes concrete and at other times shadowy and hence too vague to gain control over or fully understand. Finding ways to navigate this is an important element in allowing later generations to flourish and to help put the past to rest. Nevertheless, it is worth noting how the perspective outlined above makes the 'implantation' of the past into the unconscious of the present – the message from one generation to the next – a normal aspect of subject formation. And in a way, how could it not be so? As Lacan pointed out (the famous 'Che vuoi?' or 'What do you want?' [24]), we are forged in the desire of the other; we come into the world already structured by and through those desires and they are

communicated in whatever ways they can be, breathed in and absorbed through every interaction, every ministrations through touch and language. Without such transgenerational inheritances, we are empty of subjectivity; which is to say, there is a sense in which we are of necessity haunted by those who come before us (Freud [10] makes this one of the central planks of his later theory of the ego, shadowed by the lost object) and need to be so in order to have the resources to survive. These ghosts therefore, which so disrupt the possibility of owning our own stories, are also the stories themselves. Hyper-connectivity here lies across generations and is a key element in explaining why we do not have control over our own narratives – and how important it is that this should remain the case.

In her meditation on Jewish ethics, Judith Butler [9] presents an account of the difference between a philosophy of ethics based on ‘ontology’, making the ego the core of ethical subjecthood, and one based on relationality. She wonders about whether the latter is a specifically ‘Jewish’ ethics and comes to no absolute determination; but what she is clear about is that relationality is the superior stance: ‘Relationality displaces ontology, and it is a good thing too’ [p.5]. The ‘relationship to alterity’ is crucial here as a central feature of psychic life, one that is ‘constitutive of identity, which is to say that the relation to alterity *interrupts* identity, and this interruption is the condition of ethical relationality’ [Ibid.]. This fits with much of the writing that Butler has done over many years, perhaps particularly her work on vulnerability and violence, and the sense that each one of us is always interrupted ‘in advance’ by the presence of others, that the places we find ourselves in and the psychic spaces we occupy have already been occupied by those others. It is in large part the dependency we have in early life – our existential vulnerability – that opens out the possibility of recognising just how interdependent we are; but it is also something that can produce a ‘rageful’ response [7, p.172] leading to enactments of violence in later generations. For my purposes here, the point is that the universal experience of vulnerability fills each generation up with the ministrations of the previous one, which are sometimes calm and loving, at others anxious or even persecutory. Relationality across time perpetuates the unconscious features of each generation, the hidden loves and losses and the trauma that has not been spoken about. In his own theorising of the superego, Freud [14, p.67] makes the claim that ‘a child’s super-ego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents but of its parents’ super-ego; the contents which fill it are the same and it becomes the vehicle of tradition and of all the time-resisting judgements of value which have propagated themselves in this manner from generation to generation.’ Taken along with the general account of the formation of the ego as the incorporation of lost objects, this too is an assertion of how we are lived by previous generations: not mechanistically and deterministically, but nevertheless in constant dialogue with them, connected but also uncertainly fumbling towards a door that might lead us away from their influence. Hyper-connectivity in this sense is normal, welcome and necessary, yet troubling too.

Possession

At stake here is a version of haunting, namely *possession*. Anxiety floods the psyche as a response to unexpressed impulses (early Freud) or a threat to the integrity of the ego (later Freud) or even as the only real affect (Lacan); but perhaps we can translate this into a more general, non-technical notion of *losing one’s bearings*, by which I mean, being overwhelmed by the sense of not knowing who we might be. Vertical hyper-connectivity means possession by something outside oneself, something

that has come before and yet is experienced post-memorially as being part of us; or more to the point, as *governing* our psychic life, infiltrating and shadowing it so that the 'I' is uncertain and feels like it is pulled by strings held by others. The Jewish folklore figure of the *dybbuk* is especially vivid in this [19]: a person, usually but not always a young woman, becomes inhabited by a dead yet restless soul, who speaks through the body of the possessed without totally eradicating that person's consciousness. The result is a subject that knows itself to be possessed. Literary versions of this such as its most famous incarnation, S. An-Sky's play *The Dybbuk* [1], sometimes make the dybbuk welcome (in An-Sky's play, the dybbuk is the possessed girl's true love, with whom she wishes to be united – which in the end is exactly what happens), but the general uncanniness of the situation is very pronounced and leaves us with the powerful idea that there is always the possibility that we are not who we purport to be and that the voice that comes from inside us is in fact someone else's voice. As an aside, it might be argued that this is a routine psychoanalytic truth in any case: if the unconscious is anything at all, it is a voice that speaks from within us yet is also located 'extimately' [26], experienced as an 'it-ness' familiar yet alien at the same time. Following the Laplanchean line outlined earlier, this 'it' is an externally induced yet internally incorporated reality. In addition, it is clearly not just the messages of the previous generation that inhabit us as ghostly inscriptions; it is also their silence, the things that have remained unsaid and undone, the hurts unacknowledged, the conflicts unresolved and the debts unrepaid.

It seems reasonable to assume that this kind of experience is likely to produce anxiety, although the folklore on dybbuks and the literature on possession do not always confirm this – sometimes there is an ecstatic response, at others a persecuted or paranoid one. What anxiety indicates here, aligned with both Freud and Lacan, is how there is something else in play that is not exactly *in* the subject but is nevertheless *of* the subject. For Freud, anxiety is produced in part as a response to the absence of the desired object, a felt gap or lack; for Lacan, who is thought of as the theorist of lack, it is the *lack of a lack* that counts most – that is, an insurmountable presence that threatens to swallow up the subject. Anxiety is not a 'thing', though it is the only truthful affect; its truth lies in signalling the presence of something that *should be absent*. More precisely, anxiety is linked to the 'object a', the object cause of desire – this 'a' that cannot ever be fully articulated or known, which therefore leaves a necessary gap (a lack) which gets filled up by some substitute object – hence generating anxiety. Lacan's rather crude colonisation of this is portrayed well here:¹

The most anguishing thing for the infant is precisely the moment when the relationship upon which he's established himself, of the lack that turns him into desire, is disrupted, and this relationship is most disrupted when there's no possibility of any lack, when the mother is on his back all the while, and especially when she's wiping his backside. [25, pp.53-4]

Most explicitly [p.54]: 'anxiety isn't about the loss of the object, but its presence. The objects aren't missing.' This presence is a substitution for desire; in a cyclical form, pursuing one's desire causes anxiety, yet anxiety is also produced by the *abandonment* of desire. But for our purposes here, the key issue is how the suffocating presence of the 'thing' itself produces anxiety. This is a general perception of postmodernism, as well as of Lacanianism: postmodernism stresses the fullness of an overwhelming presence, producing anxiety not out of lack, but out of being too close to the object, face to face with its horror. It is this aspect of the postmodern condition, the way everything is

¹ Thanks to my PhD student Ana Minozzo for detailed work on this material.

wrapped up together into a space that disallows distance, which may be its most disturbing attribute [16]. Being face to face with our ancestors' unfinished business is one source of the sense of too-muchness that pervades hyper-connected culture: there is no escape, and the place where an absence should be is filled up with the ambitions, desires, losses and injustices that force themselves upon us. Anxiety? What else would be a reasonable response to this?

Yet anxiety also makes things happen. We might think about this merely commonsensically: without the provocation of anxiety, why should anything change? Slightly more psychoanalytically, if it is the case that anxiety is produced by something that lingers unconsciously, an urge lacking the desired object or a presence that fills in for the object and oppresses the subject, then a function of anxiety is to point to what is 'real', to alert us to what has gone missing and what needs to be recuperated in order for our minds to be at ease. Freud recognised this in his discussions of anxiety and in particular the attractions of certain actions that produce anxiety, sometimes mistaken for thrill-seeking. Anxiety signals danger; and often it is a prompt to a defensive move that avoids something worse. In his 1917 *Introductory Lecture* on anxiety, Freud [11, p. 394] notes different German terms bearing on anxiety, and comments,

I shall avoid going more closely into the question of whether our linguistic usage means the same thing or something clearly different by '*Angst* [anxiety]', '*Furcht* [fear]' and '*Schreck* [fright]'. I will only say that I think '*Angst*' relates to the state and disregards the object, while '*Furcht*' draws attention precisely to the object. It seems that '*Schreck*', on the other hand, does have a special sense; it lays emphasis, that is, on the effect produced by a danger which is not met by any preparedness for anxiety. We might say, therefore, that a person protects himself from fright by anxiety.

Anxiety protects a person against fright; it is a 'signal for help', as Freud notes in various places [13]. But when expanding the *Angst-Furcht-Schreck* idea in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud [12] notes [p.12] something else especially about *Schreck*.

'Anxiety' describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. 'Fear' requires a definite object of which to be afraid. 'Fright', however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise.

I have discussed this more fully elsewhere [19], but in shortened form let us note that, in contrast to other forms of anxiety, fright (*Schreck*) involves actively running into danger; that is, it suggests an element – not the whole thing, of course – of fright which is intentional, which reflects the enjoyment of putting oneself in situations in which something might happen to discombobulate us, to stir up feeling, even if the feeling that is stirred up is 'fright'. We see this in safe situations a lot; the attraction of horror films, which are in part homeopathic and cathartic but in other ways enlivening, depends on it. But in addition to this, the running into danger component of fright suggests that there is something at work in the psyche that is always dissatisfied, wanting activation and not being shy of destructiveness and self-damage. For Freud, this was notably the Death Drive: we repeat the things that trouble us the most, we allow the repressed to return, because at the heart of things we ache for an ending. Nevertheless, on the way to this ending there is a pursuit of *uncertainty*; this might make us anxious, but without it the return to rest would have no meaning at all.

Justice

To recap, drawing together a few threads here, we have:

- Hyper-connectivity across generations, manifested in the phenomenon of ‘postmemory’, in which we are taken over by the experiences of those who have come before us;
- The anxiety generated by this of not owning one’s life story;
- A question about whether one can ever own such stories, or whether the search for narrative integrity is a misreading of our lives – a kind of ‘ethical violence’ as Judith Butler [6] puts it, in which the actual fragmentation and opacity of psychic life is forced into a mould that fundamentally distorts it;
- The relationship between postmemory and possession, in which our psychic space feels occupied by someone or something else;
- How anxiety relates to this as a postmodern anxiety of ‘too muchness’, of being closed in by phenomena that will not leave us alone – of having the necessary space of lack filled up, generating the claustrophobia of occupation;
- But how anxiety, which often signals danger, can also be a mobilisation of the psyche towards action – how it can make us feel alive.

What might be the nature of this ‘feeling alive’? I want to get at this through a question about the resolution of possession: what is it that puts to rest the troubled spirit that possesses, the dybbuk which cannot find a home and so comes back to inhabit another’s being? Avery Gordon [21], in her study of social haunting, has an answer, as does Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi [33] in his meditation on the nature of Jewish memory. For both of them, what puts ghosts to rest is *justice*. Gordon is explicit on this: ‘What’s distinctive about haunting,’ she claims [21, p.xvi], ‘is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely.’ Something *unresolved* is at work, which is why Gordon goes on to write [21, p.62] ‘that the ghost is alive, so to speak. We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory out of a concern for justice. Out of a concern for justice would be the only reason one would bother.’ Similarly Yerushalmi, who debates the virtues of forgetting – that sometimes it is better to forget than to remember things and dwell on them in such a way that nothing can change – but in the end argues the necessity for remembering even traumatic pasts that make us suffer as they are recalled. Why is this? Because the risk of forgetting outweighs that of remembering; and anyway, suggests Yerushalmi [33, p.117], ‘Is it possible that the antonym of “forgetting” is not “remembering,” but *justice*?’

If we can take this claim about the centrality of justice seriously, then it may be that we should not too briskly seek to remove the anxiety that possession by the past generates in us. What keeps it alive is clearly a complex tapestry of entwined materials, including family and communal attachments, ideas and fantasies about identity and rootedness, and ideological structures that position subjects according to their supposed ethnic, religious and racialised heritage. But if the ghosts that possess us are restless spirits, as postmemory implies, then their continued presence and the anxiety it brings also indicates the need to seek out justice. Justice of some kind, however complex this might be (judicial justice might be a component, but many other forms of recognition and acknowledgement might also be required, including that by states and by the descendants of

the perpetrators of injustice), might be crucial to the settling of postmemory, to the laying to rest of ghosts [3,20]. This is certainly the nature of the second generation postmemorial heritage: however much memorialisation goes on, injustices were committed – immense, horrific ones, if we consider the prime examples, Holocaust, apartheid, Stalinism and so on – and remedying them is probably an unending task facing insurmountable obstacles. The fuelling of postmemorial work through the anxiety that vertical hyper-connectivity produces is then a quest for justice that may be doomed; but it is nevertheless in the service of life, in that it aims at relieving the anxiety of possession by externalising the postmemory and working it through.

Yerushalmi's *Zachor* [33] raises some crucial points about Jewish memory as *reliving* the past, as if time is not linear but instead recapitulates in a circular way what has supposedly gone before. Everything returns; and because of this, the occurrence of an event is a *recurrence*, its meaning given primarily by the original. Messianic time is a time of return – an idea visible in Walter Benjamin's notion, developed by Judith Butler [8], that the messianic period will be one in which the silenced voices of the oppressed will 'flash up' into consciousness. Butler [8, p.83] reads messianic time as 'a memory of suffering from another time that interrupts and reorients the politics of this time' and imagines this to transpose 'the memory of suffering into the future of justice, not as revenge but as the figuring of a time in which the history that covers over the history of oppression might cease.' However, the returns that characterise Jewish remembrance are often returns of complaint and suffering; where they fit Butler's scheme is that they allow these voices to be eternally heard, but whilst they call for justice they do not necessarily ever achieve it. In addition, there is a problem which is not just an issue in Jewish history: where apparent justice does arrive, for instance through Truth and Reconciliation commissions, it is often dissatisfying and fails to achieve its goal.

Here is a brief extract from an interview with a psychoanalyst who participated in the Truth Commission of Brazil set up by President Dilma Rousseff before she was impeached. The psychoanalyst was invited by the President to join the Commission and focused her work on the impact of the 1964-1985 civil-military dictatorship on the indigenous people of the Amazon. In an interview in 2016, carried out as part of a research project on psychoanalysis during the dictatorship,² we asked the psychoanalyst about her experience and in particular what overall effect she thought the Truth Commission had had. Her response (in the original English) was definite:

I think it was near zero, I was very disappointed. Brazil was the last one from the countries in Latin America and everybody, the young people who had not lived in it and the old people, the ones who were not victims had forgotten the dictatorship. So there was an interest in universities, yes, we were invited to speak in many universities and in the small commissions of the relatives of the victims but what shocked me in 2014 ... In my personal research, sometimes I talk to someone at the bus station or on the streets by curiosity, I was from the Truth Commission, most people I spoke in the streets the dictatorship was better than now, there was not a mess, things were in order and they were right to arrest those communists.

What the psychoanalyst is referring to in the ellipsis after 'what shocked me in 2014' was the moment in the impeachment of Rousseff when Jair Bolsonaro, who later became President of Brazil, dedicated his vote against her to the memory of Colonel Brilhante Ustra, who had headed the

² *Psicanálise e Contexto Social no Brasil: Fluxos Transnacionais, Impacto Cultural e Regime Autoritário. Projeto FAPESP 2015/11244-3.* My co-researcher was Professor Belinda Mandelbaum of the University of São Paulo.

torture unit responsible for the torture of Roussieff during the dictatorship. Our psychoanalyst then goes on to note how ‘most’ ordinary citizens (‘someone at the bus station’) remember or imagine the dictatorship as a better time than now, seeing it as more orderly and free of disruptive communists. This is after the psychoanalyst has introduced herself to them as a member of the Truth Commission, so clearly represents a statement meant to antagonise and impress. There is of course nothing systematic about this – the psychoanalyst is clear that she is engaging in ‘personal research’, but she is also a practised observer and clear political thinker, well known in Brazil and so we might put some weight on her testimony. It fits into something else in any case: the question of what it takes to mourn a period of violence in such a way that it does not recur. In Brazil, the dictatorship did not come to a dramatic end as it did in some other Latin American countries; it rather faded away, and its end was preceded in 1979 by the Brazilian military president João Baptista Figueiredo passing a law that provided a general and unrestricted amnesty to all the perpetrators of political crimes, whether they were members or defenders of the civil-military regime or those who opposed it. The consequence of this is that no-one has been called to task for the violence of that period, even when Truth Commissions have provided evidence. It has also meant that many alleged perpetrators have been able to take refuge in denials. Our psychoanalyst described the scene:

they only said ‘nothing to declare, nothing to declare,’ you can do nothing. We had the power to force them to come but not to force them to tell the truth, we are not torturers, we made the question, ‘nothing to declare, it’s false, no it wasn’t me. Nothing to declare.’

Is it too far-fetched to suggest that the restoration of right-wing rule in Brazil and the nostalgia for the period of the dictatorship are linked to the failure of acknowledgement, mourning and reparation for past oppression? This is obviously not to deny that powerful political and cultural factors are in play: economic decline, corruption, populist nationalism, American Trumpism and so on. Nevertheless, the perpetuation of injustice and refusal to come to terms with past horrors – which for many Brazilians is what they were – is precisely the set of conditions that militates against the setting to rest of ghosts. These ghosts come back to haunt in all directions, and one response to them is to deny them again, to try to exorcise them by violence. Perhaps we have in Brazil (and elsewhere, but those are other stories) exactly this scenario: our hyper-connectivity to the past leaves us plagued with ghosts that demand recognition and justice; but this is a painful process requiring openness and the courage to acknowledge the damage that has been done and who has responsibility for it. Where the social order is insufficiently resilient to manage this, the ghosts are banished again and in their place appears another kind of repetitive phenomenon, the return of the ‘repressive authority’ that blocks a coming-to-terms with the unquiet remains of the ancestors. This is indicated psychoanalytically under the heading of the return of the repressed and the death drive and is perhaps the real danger of intergenerational hyper-connectivity: that we might try to rid ourselves of it through violence.

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