

Psychoanalysis of the Excommunicated

A few months after the World Health Organization declared the global coronavirus outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020, I wrote to the mental health NGOs and initiatives I have collaborated with for up to a decade now, clinics and centers that offer varieties of psychotherapeutic assistance to poor populations in global cities (Kolkata, Chennai, New York, London). The answer, unequivocal, from the three corners of the globe, was that work hadn't stopped, however stressful the increased caseload was for mental health professionals and despite the fact that grief counselling, a taxing job as well as a hard-earned skill, had overtaken other forms of therapy. There was no respite, no salutary social, economic, or psychological interregnum, for the slum inhabitants or transient and refugee populations these charities tend. Therefore, not only could the interventions not be stalled but they also had to be repurposed quickly to become Covid-safe and lockdown-compliant. The homeless inhabitants with psychosocial disabilities were staying put, said Dr Tony Stern, resident psychiatrist at Harlem's TLC (Transitional Living Community), and the Covid infection rates were remarkably low as a result. The participants in the horticultural psychotherapy initiative of the UK's Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust were getting used to group therapy on Zoom. Ahmet Caglar, the psychotherapist in charge, pointed out that many of his clients, from the Turkish migrant community in Hackney, London, had never used the Internet. "We have lost the richness of nature with all its metaphors, but the virtual world also provided us a fertile ground for symbolism," Caglar

says stoically. The Banyan, based in Chennai, India, continued its work “without disruption” across its sites in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Maharashtra, their 2020 newsletter states, not simply keeping up core care services but adding resources such as a 109-bed residential center in Chennai’s Chengalpet for homeless people with acute mental illness. Besides operating emergency care and recovery centers such as this one in the different states, districts, and local subdivisions, Banyan’s response to contingencies included medical referrals and provisions of food, medicine, and social care for clients and their families accessing outpatient services. Staff members marked deaths in the Banyan organization with funerals respecting the deceased person’s culture: these were grievable lives, however pervasive the shortage of resources.

This quick overview suggests three key characteristics of an adapted psychotherapy for the poor, which I shall term accessibility, adaptability, and holistic mental health solutions. First, the therapeutic service is not terminated at will, just as psychomachia does not cease even or especially when the pandemic brings the world to a near standstill. Second, the constitutive adaptability of psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy in the community, which has already dispensed with classic structures and orientations, may make it more amenable to unforeseeable change than its institutionalized counterpart. Finally, the approach to mental health is holistic, wherein it is engaged with through a “wellbeing and development paradigm, rather than through an illness framework” (Banyan). Such a holistic outlook takes into consideration the psychic life of the affected individual in its entirety: their dreams, aspirations, the singularity and alterity of each life even when it is defined in terms of a racialised, disenfranchised, and agentless group. It also sees the symptom as linked directly or indirectly to the socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of sustained

poverty and entrenched structures of race, class, and caste apartheid in cities and nation states. “We had to pay some of their phone bills for those who had access to the internet on their mobiles but no means to pay for it,” says Divya Kandukuri, founder of The Blue Dawn, which supports the dalit-bahujan-advansi community (Bhatt). Therapeutic intervention in the community often starts by addressing material needs.

The instrumental language used by institutions such as Banyan--creating “exit pathways” for marginalized people to return to communities of choice--defines the telos of several free or sliding-fee clinics that offer brief therapy sessions to reinstate functionality in the client, operating a revolving-door policy in the expectation that there may be a relapse and return in the near future. Analyzing the imaginaries and possibilities of community psychotherapy, this essay will dwell on an example of singular psychoanalysis at the intersection of “clinical praxis, theory, and social justice,” to quote Daniel José Gaztambide (193). In this special issue of differences, devoted to psychoanalysis and solidarity, I will analyze interventions in the psychical lives of refugeedom and a community that is denied legitimacy and liveability by the state.<1>

My article draws on Honey Oberoi Vahali’s decade-long (1996–2007) ethnographic work on Tibetan refugees, their endurance and survival, and alternative forms of life and living. Vahali is a clinical psychologist who uses a “psychoanalytical sensibility” to reconstruct the lives of three generations of Tibetans (Faculty). She works with identificatory systems predicated on the loss of home (and homeland) and racial grief, careful not to make an elision frequently seen in psychoanalytical analyses of race whereby the subject in pain is denied sovereignty and agency. Anne Anlin Cheng, in her formidable

work on race and melancholia, acutely describes this tendency as “the assumption that ‘damage’ (in the form of having internalized harmful dominant ideals) amounts to the same thing as having no agency or, conversely, the presumption that having agency or ‘a strong ego’ makes one impermeable to such invasions” (15). Vahali states from start to finish that while chronicling the “psychologically devastating consequences of torture and refugeehood,” she has searched for “symbols of human resilience,” choosing to focus on creative possibilities and the return to renewed meaning in these benighted and delegitimated lives (Lives xxxv). I will return to this agential vocabulary after a detailed discussion of the psychoanalytic work undertaken by Vahali.

Diasporic Modernity; Exilic Dissociation

In Lives in Exile: Exploring the Inner World of Tibetan Refugees, Vahali offers an account of “analytical significance” in the life chronicles recounted by exiled Tibetans in India. Her challenge here is to balance the history of a displaced peoples without losing sight of the individual life story. As a clinical psychologist, the challenge for Vahali is also not to transmute individual histories into case studies. She outlines the credo of this psychohistory as follows: “I have tried to give equal space to themes of psychological loss and destruction as to those of recovery, resilience and the ultimate symbolisation of meaning in the life of my Tibetan participants” (ix). This work is not psychoanalysis in the obvious sense (of offering supportive psychotherapy), but it deploys the psychodynamics of psychoanalysis to understand the complex meanings of exile as played out in the daily lives of around 7,000 dislocated Tibetans in Dharamsala, in the Indian mountain state of Himachal Pradesh.<2>

Exile, Vahali explains, has three key valences in the Tibetan survivor tales: expulsion

(from homeland) and homelessness; self-alienation; a (communist) revolution that is denied fruition and holism through disassociation. Vahali's psychoanalytic account seeks primarily to shed light on the plight of the exile, framed by the ongoing oppression of the Tibetan peoples. In the process, she also scrutinizes the truth claims of psychoanalysis itself, moving from scientific inquiry to an epistemology of the unknowable, "appreciating the inter-subjective relational genesis of all forms of existence" (333). Her book is about a singular, historically determined form of psychic trauma, no doubt, but it is also, finally, an analyst's quest for an analytical attitude capable of ambivalence, uncertainty, divided loyalties, and intrapsychic identification. The psychoanalytic work, in other words, is not there only to examine the traumatic ruptures of refugee lives. Nor is it primarily aimed at adding a new archive to other forms of intergenerational relay of trauma and memory (in relation to Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Holocaust, or the Vietnam War, for example). Throughout the narrative, Vahali attempts to create common ground where psychic restitution and recovery may be contemplated in the face of past or perpetual catastrophes.

One of the twelve Tibetans interviewed by Vahali is Phuntsok Dolma. Vahali was in conversation with her aunt, Pemo, when Dolma interrupted, offering her own story. Dolma is "intense" about the social invisibility of Tibetan refugees and of the powerlessness of women and marginalized groups (47). This case--or the fragment of an analysis of a case (Dolma leaves for Bhopal without finishing her story due to a family emergency)--offers Vahali unique insights into the impact of trauma on adolescent life. Dolma was born in Kham, the eastern province of Tibet, the first to be attacked by China because of its physical proximity. The Khampas fought back, but in a matter of four years (1950–54) they were recruited into the Chinese army--when not brutally punished for their resistance. Dolma

recalls the bloodbath of 1959, with bodies from mass killings choking the roads. From this time onward, when the thirteen-year-old had to trawl the streets, removing the shroud over scattered dead bodies to look for her missing father or uncle, a sense of benumbing marks Dolma's accounts: "I felt absolutely stoned"; "I felt absolutely numb inside"; "Stunned by events, I couldn't feel anything any longer"; "I just stood watching [. . .] I couldn't cry" (47–49).

Dolma's parents decide to flee to India, where His Holiness the Dalai Lama has taken refuge, risking the extreme privation of leaving family, friends, and earthly possessions behind. They are apprehended by Chinese officials, and Dolma's sister is quite possibly raped, but the father manages to plan an escape with the family. Another perilous journey commences over days and nights, to Pokhara in Nepal, then Lucknow and Narkanda in India. It is a common occurrence for refugees to perish from heat, starvation, and illness, and this number includes Dolma's mother, who dies in childbirth in a cave, where the family had been sheltering from Chinese forces. Dolma, a substitute mother for her newborn brother, lives with her father in a refugee camp in Narkanda while one of her sisters is married off and her younger siblings sent to Tibetan Children's Village. Unable to go to school because of childcaring responsibilities, Dolma is reduced to begging until she is old enough to work at a construction site.

Dolma lists the external and internal injuries of these years: more than the physical hazards of working on a building site, it is the searing shame she feels at being thought sexually available by Indian men, in particular the soldiers who flash cash at Tibetan girls, making vulgar passes tempting them to bed. Particularly excruciating for Dolma is the reality

that Tibetan refugee women in India, despite the traditional and conservative sexual mores of Tibetan society, would frequently resort to prostitution to keep home fires burning.

“What do you do when you see nothing else but misery and hunger [. . .] on all sides? You sell yourself, you sell your daughter. Once, then twice, then later what difference does it make?” (51). It is the oldest story in the world, so why were Tibetan women being singled out for selling sex, Dolma asks angrily. Married for three decades to a man in Bhopal, she remembers resolving, as a mere girl, to educate her daughters and never let them work by the roadside.

The analyst in *Vahali* registers that Dolma’s deep-seated trauma is related to her hapless and nonagential position as witness to historic atrocities: the teenager “scanning the dead” (49) to locate bodies of father and uncle; the child overhearing her parents’ precipitate decision to leave Lhasa; the daughter massaging her mother’s forehead as she lay dying; the young girl, a child herself, having to nurture an infant brother. “Dolma could cope with the present and deal with the vicissitudes of life only by not allowing herself to emoter or consciously experience pain,” *Vahali* notes (49, my emphasis). Dolma talks passionately instead of the afflictions of being a woman or a stateless person. Despite this skein of identifications, which are not only national or paranational, *Vahali* registers a rootlessness in Dolma, a transcendental state of motherlessness as it were. Referring to a time of great turmoil in 1995, when Tibetan refugee communities were rocked with violence following clashes between Tibetan and Indian youths, Dolma recalls: “Our houses were stoned and our shops burned. [. . .] Our people [were] beaten and our children humiliated. We remained silent. Can a child shout without his mother’s protection?” (54).

Vahali tries to reconcile this defeatism with Phuntsok Dolma's need to be seen, as expressed in the plaintive "My generation will pass away without leaving any visible imprints" (55). How long can a people imagine an ancestral past and a lost homeland? All around her is death--her father's, sister's, brother's: brutish endings to short, unfulfilled lives. "Lost in life, we will be completely lost in death," Dolma cries out (55). She urges her interviewer to write the story of her tortured Tibetanhood just as she herself has become a representative of the "collective cause," making sure that she makes true Tibetans of her four children (58). Vahali is filled with admiration for this child who has worked through her vulnerabilities to become a strong mother, a feminist, and a socialist whose empathy has telescopic (global) reach. Vahali sees in this behavior the affective legacies of both of Dolma's parents: the father's quiet decisiveness, the mother's depressive sufferance. Vahali urges us not to dismiss Dolma's pain strictly in terms of the "immediately visible devastation" in her life; the analytic author provides pathways into the intergenerational contagion of trauma, the "sharing of the parents' destiny that increases and prolongs the child's consciousness of pain" (57).

Later in the book, Vahali describes the dream lives of Pemo and her niece, Phuntsok Dolma. The term dream, here, stands for a composite of aspiration, utopianism, and nostalgia, as well as eruptions of incomprehensible, unconscious material. Pemo restlessly dreams of wanting to go back to her homeland and of being repeatedly thwarted in that aim by the uncanny optics of the homeland itself. "My dreams saw me traversing through the familiar territory of the homeland. But on getting up in the morning, I would remember that instead of being reunited, I had in my dreams again bid farewell to my parents and family. Even in my dreams [. . .] the landscape of Tibet appeared alien and unfamiliar" (255). Pemo

describes Tibet--the pastures, animals, snow-capped mountains--as "irretrievably lost to me" (255). The animals seem to be anticipating her return at first, their faces upturned. Then they cry, and she starts crying with them. Each day, the animals die. The moment of abruptly leaving home, of never properly saying goodbye, seems to have forever ruined her relationship with this primordial environment.

Mountains feature in Dolma's dreams too: "In one rather frequent dream, I saw myself approaching Mount Kailash, but as I neared the sacred mountain, it covered itself with mist. Being so close by, I still couldn't see it" (255). The sacred mountain obscures itself from the one who returns, or the revenants of this dream of returning. "Is there guilt in the dreamer's dream?" Vahali asks, citing the Eriksonian observation that in forced migration, homesickness turns to a self-accusation (256).^{<3>} The refugee who is forced to leave the land becomes the abandoner and traitor in the dream's twisted logic: after all, they have abandoned their own in times of crisis. In Erikson's interpretation, this guilt is protective, giving the ego a semblance of control over the inexorable workings of fate. Vahali explains: "[N]ot to be guilty could be overwhelmingly threatening, for then the refugee would be forced to confront the reality of being completely helpless in determining his/her historical and personal fate" (256). To be guilty, by the same token, is to be a subject of history, correcting its inexorability and willed occlusions in scripts of commemoration and retelling.

Chronicling the refugee tales, Vahali grapples with idées fixes, repetitions, estranged and garbled nonverbal and gestural language. Words have an aberrant relationship with reference. Flight, for instance, is both journey to the refuge and the retreat from it; expulsion is not an event that can be decisively located in the past, but is repeated (second

expulsion, third expulsion) in a cycle of loss; homecoming to a changed Tibet is as “traumatic and painful as flight,” as one of the interviewees tells Vahali (256). Deeply upsetting or uprooting experience, Erikson says in his essay “Identity and Uprootedness,” “brings about a partial regression both to the basic hope for recognition and the basic horror of its failure” (qtd. in Vahali 256). Erikson likens the failed (unrecognized) self to a still-born, dead identity. Not only is the language of such persons incommunicable, in parts, but the interlocutor gets the sense that they are not always listening to the words but hanging on, true to the Eriksonian characterization, to the glance or the tone of the voice, hoping for identity-giving recognition. In the next section, we revisit Freudian trauma theory and its circuitous articulation of the death drive to examine its continued relevance for, as well as non-correspondence with, the traumatic memory and testimonies of the Tibetan refugees.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Rereading Trauma and the Death Drive

Sigmund Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) contains ideas that would become mainstays of psychoanalytic criticism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: fort-da, the passivity of the experience sublated in the activity of the game; Tancred and Clorinda’s erotic wounding; the death drive as interior to life, and the desire for death definitive of the very interiority posited by psychoanalysis; the “beyond” that was not spatial but temporal, “an earlier state of things”; and last, but not least, the “limping hesitation” with which world-altering theories must be proposed. There was also a plethora of ideas that both Freudian culture and metapsychology have chosen to forget: the idea of prereproductive conjugation, a forerunner of postcolonial theorizations of hybridity; the mellifluous phrase

“myrmidons of death” (“Thus these guardians of life, too, were originally the myrmidons of death,” Freud says of self-preservative instincts 47); the startling discovery that, in chapter 6, Freud uses “primaeval” and “primitive” interchangeably (53); the comic moment where he describes the germ cells of malignant neoplasms as “narcissistic.” Reading Freud after Derrida’s exposition in The Post Card, we uncover the semantic excess of the text, starting with the title: Pleasure Principle, PP, as Professeur Principal, pépé, Ernst’s papa and his mother Sophie’s papa, Ernst’s and arguably everyone else’s peepee, the Postal Principle of faltering self-address, or sending forth the letter risking nonarrival and nonreturn.

Curiously, the excess of this text is tied to the death drive, not desire. If the Freud of 1905 had anatomized human motivation along the lines of “sexual instinct” and “self-preservation instinct,” in BPP, he lumps these together as “life instinct,” pitting it against the repetitive patterning, the “daemonic force” of the death instinct. The death drive is not one drive among others but, as Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis observe, “the drive par excellence,” typifying the repetitive nature of instinct or drive in general, binding every wish, whether sexual, instinctual, or melancholic, to the wish for death (98). The death drive operates independent of or against the pleasure principle. Not only is the ego’s protective shield breached as it is flooded with large amounts of stimulus (trauma theorist Ruth Leys points out the quasi-military terminology used here [23]), but another problem arises, Freud says: “[T]he problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can be disposed of” (43). Binding is a strange term in Freud’s lexicon, like the uncanny in that it implies its opposite: unbinding. Freud is elaborating here on Josef Breuer’s hypothesis of unbound and bound energy: the first is free and mobile, the second is quiescent, and they are ranked as primary and

secondary psychical processes.

What is being repeated in the death instinct is not present and vital but inanimate matter. Life drives rush forward: the death drive seeks to restore what came before the living entity. Freud had talked about repetition in The Interpretation of Dreams, Jokes, New Introductory Lectures, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through.” Repetition, in these earlier iterations, is expedient data for the analyst: a ploy for mastery; a symptom of phobia, anxiety, fixation, inhibition; another word for transference. In BPP, however, repetition is retrograde, a compulsion. The model of the human being is no longer a system striving for equilibrium, but one where the death drive entropically leads “what is living to death” (55). If the pleasure principle works to maintain homeostasis--evacuating energy when the tension is too high and seeking excitation when the energy level is too low--the death drive is about zero states, and the tendency to discharge stimulation as much as possible is the expression of an inclination to die. Repetition is the name Freud gives to the errant and the aberrant: in its search for suffering or unpleasure, Laplanche and Pontalis state, the death drive “binds every wish, whether aggressive or sexual, to the wish for death” (103). It is the need to ruin what is whole in a bid (and in repeated bids) to become whole again. Freud gives examples from Plato’s Symposium and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the former a possible repetition and derivation of the latter, which is dated 800 BC. In both Greek myth and Hindu scripture, the unified, plenteous self feels lonely and wishes for a second. It is halved, with each part now desiring the other “and eager to grow into one” (70).

A massive influx of stimulus can come from events external to the mechanism or

from instinctual demands within the body. The failure of the ego's attempts at mastery and binding produces psychic trauma. Dreams in such neuroses start manifesting "an obedience to the compulsion to repeat" (37). Freud defines repetition as the "perpetual recurrence of the same thing," putting the phrase in quotation marks as (and this is James Strachey's observation) it is itself a repetition of Nietzsche. What comes back through the compulsion to repeat is not the threat of death, but what Catherine Malabou describes as "the pure neutrality of inorganic matter" (79), a state of being that is neither life nor death but their uncanny resemblance. The repetitive traumatic neuroses represent, to quote Leys, "a radical unbinding of the death drive" (34), but these are accompanied by a simultaneous binding or rebinding of cathexes. Binding and unbinding are constitutive of each other and co-constitute the tumultuous life between pre- and postorganic states. Binding gives form to the excess of energy threatening the psyche, attaching its traumatic and mobile force to specific ideational elements. It seems to oppose the pleasure principle but is actually a preparatory act "which introduces and assures the dominance of the pleasure principle" (76); it prepares the excitation for "its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge" (62).

In a letter to Sándor Ferenczi dated March 17, 1919, Freud called BPP a "mysterious title" (qtd. in Makari 315). The mystery of whether pleasure is a release from tension--or a constancy of tension--remains unresolved till the end ("the dominating tendency of mental life is the effort to reduce, or keep constant [. . .] internal tension due to stimuli"). The book was half-finished when Freud's daughter Sophie died: the term "death drive" appeared shortly after the deaths of his friend, Anton von Freund, and Sophie. Building on Lacan's interpretation that the Freudian conceptualizing of trauma is a "revelation of a basic ethical dilemma at the heart of consciousness insofar as it is essentially related to death, and

particularly the deaths of others,” Caruth suggests an itinerary in Freud’s trauma theory where trauma moves from an accidental intrusion into consciousness to being its very origin (104).^{<4>} But is this ur-trauma, which is the wellspring of life and consciousness, necessarily associated with an experience of death or deaths? Andrew Barnaby astutely points out that Caruth’s (and Lacan’s) interpretation of the death drive (formulated by Freud in the dream of the burning child) as the father’s (momentary) suspension of consciousness should not be universalized: “[T]he accident of a child’s death is not common to all people. In other words, despite what Lacan or Caruth might think, the trauma that arises ‘in response to the death of others’ is precisely what is the exception and therefore should not be substituted for Freud’s ‘global theoretical itinerary,’ a theory of the origins of trauma as common to all” (47). If we take Barnaby’s insight a step further and read trauma theory in relation to singular testimonies of, say, Tibetan refugees, afflicted by real and social deaths in an extreme unimaginable by most, Freud’s speculative and mystical account of the traumatic awakening to life seems out of place. In Freud’s formulation, the trauma that confers consciousness of being has happened at a prior time: “The attributes of life were at some time awoken in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception” (38). The first drive comes to being with this tension in what was once inanimate, a tension that will have to cancel itself out (for the organism to return to its inanimate state). In what follows, I wish to argue the fatal role of war, migration, and a racialized existence in formulating the death instinct beyond the primitive and elementary biological stage Freud discovers.

If the death drive of Freud’s formulation defines instinctuality itself by showing how the compulsion to repeat works in tandem with the pleasure principle, the trauma-induced

death instinct is a massive influx of stimulus (as described earlier in this essay). John Fletcher aptly interprets it as what lies beyond the pleasure or constancy principle, “the instance of traumatic repetition, an instance without pleasurable supports, reinforcements, or by-products, an instance, apparently, of pure--and purely self-destructive--repetition” (295). The question is whether the compulsion to repeat is not just beyond but also before the pleasure principle, a primitive coping mechanism for excessive stimuli organic to all humankind. Citing Laplanche and Pontalis on Freud’s multivalent idea of binding, Fletcher, too, sees it as a bulwark against an “unmanageable surplus of excitations pressing by the shortest route to a massive, unregulated, and exhausting discharge” (303).^{<5>} However, given the belatedness of the experience of trauma, Fletcher wonders how the “repeated production of a belated anxiety missing from the original breaching event [. . .] achieve[s] the binding and mastery that Freud seeks” (303).

To begin to address Fletcher’s question, we need to consider the difference between extreme psychic trauma in relation to varieties of traumatic experience that allow the death instinct to seek what Hanna Segal calls “life-promoting” objects or love (55).^{<6>} The concept of binding might work with the latter but falters with “death instinct derivatives,” a phrase coined by Dori Laub and Susanna Lee, of a large magnitude, which remain “unmediated and unimpeded” (Laub and Lee 441). “These trauma-induced death instinct derivatives are thus far more ‘pure’ (and closer to Freud’s original definition of the phenomenon) than the death instinct derivatives in normal psychological development,” Laub and Lee observe. Some of the outward manifestations of such trauma--although it can pass unnoticed--are withdrawal, empathic failure, feelings of rupture, a loss of narrative and coherence. Analysis in these cases involves a restitution of self-representation that has been destroyed by

trauma: “It is by no means, though, a forcible, belated insertion of meaning where none can exist,” Laub and Lee conclude (447). Turning to Vahali’s sensitive curation of the accounts of Tibetan torture survivors, we trace the spectral history of the “inner destruction” of lives, manifesting in feelings of being polluted, ripped apart, or made invisible (305).

The subject of such pure trauma is not a subject without history: as Baranger et al. suggest, there are “subjects with a history, but a history with a huge hole in it” (125). Massive psychic trauma, Laub and Lee reiterate, leads to a strong compulsion to repeat destruction--and a compromising of the strength to arrest that diabolical repetition. It must be comprehended, they say, as “a force of annihilation--of memory, of reality, of life” (461) for a treatment to be initiated that engages with history, society, and ethnicity, not just biology. Tibetans were tortured by the Chinese under the pretext of interrogations and extracting confessions. Mental and physical torture, imprisonment and solitary confinement, and public denunciations were used by Communist authorities in the name of reform, through which feudal Tibetans were to be indoctrinated in socialist ideology. Prisoners were made to beat their own parents and teachers and occasionally participate in their public executions; upper-class Tibetan prisoners were systematically tortured to make them review and repent their supposedly iniquitous past; their group self was denigrated when not entirely cancelled in these modes of biopolitical control.

Common elements of each recounting by the Tibetan survivors of torture include: filthy and claustrophobic cells; generous administrations of electric shock, especially through prods in the mouth; savage beatings and penetrations of the body (eyes, face, vagina); rape; deprivation of food, water, trips to the lavatory, sanitary products. “I tried to

hide myself, but soon many male prisoners, mostly criminals, were made to stand outside the cell and view my ordeal,” states one account. “Ashamed, I wanted to reduce myself to an invisible speck” (308). Another witness states in a matter-of-fact manner how the young woman was asked to clean the quarters of the warden of Karze prison, where she also did laundry and was raped (308). “I lost all contact with reality,” states yet another. “I began to imagine things that had happened in the past, feeling as if they were happening at the time” (309). The perpetrators imagined themselves “torturer/reformers,” their task a disaggregating of the mind of the Tibetan from the body whose arms have been wrenched from their sockets, or one which has, in the pangs of hunger, eaten wood and chewed on clothes. The torture survivors find it relatively easy to talk about how they had been coerced to give up companions and coworkers under torture; they fall silent when it comes to talking about the ways in which they were made to defile and destroy sacral objects like thankas or mani stones. The survivors describe their experience of interrogations as a public nakedness that goes far beyond a disrobing of the body: it is as if, Vahali writes, “nothing can remain untouched and untainted and no psychological, bodily, or relational space can be claimed by the prisoners as being their own” (315).

As mentioned at the start of this essay, Vahali’s self-avowed task is not to provide therapeutic assistance to Tibetan refugees, including the survivors of torture. Her psychohistory aims, rather, to help readers understand the inextricability of history and psyche while assessing the consequences of the “abusive exposure” in this displaced and dispossessed community (315). As is often the case with other practitioners of an adapted psychoanalysis of the poor, Vahali questions classic trauma theory by adding hitherto unknown symptoms to its archive. These are some of the affective terms she uses: “ripped

apart”; a “tightness,” or an inability to breathe; “split” and lost “self-parts”; an “annihilative experience.” In the throes of the complete disintegration of the physical body, the torture victim says, “kill me,” not “save me” or “release me,” as they had initially pleaded. Praying loses meaning and the nurturing memory of loving relationships or happy times is obliterated. Trauma inheres in the absolute lack of sense (sensation as well as sensibleness). As a survivor, First name? Palden writes, he could hear nothing beyond his own screams and the thud of fists landing on his chest. “The scream was so deep and primitive that beyond its reverberating resonance, nothing [. . .] existed and nothing [. . .] made sense” (317).

For the psychotherapist or the psychohistorian, this moment of “total darkness” (317), an aporetic reality, is antithetical to the very being of the tortured person, whose terror must be made both visceral and symbolic. Lying in his pool of urine and vomit, Palden said that there was no one to “clean up” and “gather” his shattered self. Very few torture survivors can overcome what Vahali calls “the destruction that they suffered in that single, existential moment” (317). The Tibetan refugee nation, faced with the enormity of an ongoing loss, may also never begin to mourn it. In the retelling of the episodes of torture to Vahali, however, the gruesome face of the torturer is replaced by a different one: the intent face of the analyst, with its invitation to trust and to relate. The role of psychotherapeutic listening here is comparable to Wilfred Bion’s theory of containing, a concept of projective identification in which the therapist can contain or hold the patient’s anxieties, transmuting sense impressions to proto-thoughts and reducing the toxicity of the thought. It is an act of binding that helps the patient comprehend, if not immediately remedy, what Elizabeth E. Povinelli eloquently calls “the unequal distribution of life and death, of hope and harm, and of exhaustion and endurance” (40).

Vahali's multigenre Lives in Exile--autobiographical, psychoanalytical, historical, ethnographic, and philosophical in parts--ends with a list of practical recommendations for the Tibetan exile. This, she says, is toward a restoration of "selfhood," which, despite the deep cultural moorings and faith of this long-suffering group, can become blocked and fragmented. The exiles, Vahali states, need to verbally express and grieve their losses, supplementing traditional Buddhist methods of healing with modern psychotherapeutic processes. They need to move away from a rapturous idealization of a lost past, with concomitant feelings of disenchantment about the present. Vahali describes this healing dynamic as a "long psychological journey" in which good and bad objects, the old and the new self, are integrated in and as potentiality (319). Holistic self-representations, in turn, will help the exile and/or the torture survivor stop regarding themselves as fragmented or marginalized. Vahali enjoins a forgiving of the enemy, which is not a religious imperative, but a moving away from the catastrophic experience of a killing state (and traumatic transmissions of this experience across time and generations). The containment of negative feelings, she says, would also prevent the older generations from feeling estranged from the new: instead of treating the newcomers as Chinese spies, Vahali advises acknowledging them as "an integral though long-separated self-part" (321). Finally, restoring sovereignty and individuality to what Povinelli calls the "mass subject" of modern ethnography (49), Vahali urges that the group, with its hard-won coherence, relent to differences within, dissenting voices, and critiques of the status quo.

If PTSD is a disease of time, as Allan Young states, then "[w]ithin the Tibetan psychiatric nosologies, there is no particular gloss for such a disorder," Sara Lewis explains (316). This is not to say the Tibetan refugees do not feel the pain or epistemological

confusion in intransitive encounters with the past. What happens instead, according to Lewis, is a “‘letting go’ of negative emotions and distress,” rather than speaking openly about them (316). The experience of trauma does not disrupt identity necessarily: a Tibetan subject may accept pain as a just manifestation of karma, for instance, and choose to uncouple the experience of pain from the outcome of suffering, as the Buddha preached. “For people living in North America, when something devastating occurs, they typically ask: ‘why me?’ Tibetans do not ask this question. One may struggle with what happens in one’s life, but ultimately karma acts as an ordering principle of reality, allowing people to accept what life brings them” (Lewis 319). As Vahali refers to in her account, Lewis cites studies wherein Tibetan refugee respondents, when asked to rank traumatic events, said that they had found the destruction of religious sites and artefacts more distressing than even imprisonment and torture. In case after case, the ethnographer finds subjects battered of body but determined to be dignified and composed mentally, whether or not this equanimity is fully actualized in the psychic lives of the refugees.

A highly relevant question posed by Sara Lewis in her article, which examines the toll of political violence on the Tibetan exile community, is whether the Tibetans are “truly ‘resilient’ or if they simply avoid identifying symptoms of mental distress” (318). Lewis’s approach is to see coping as a learned response and “moral practice.” The flexibility of mind Lewis sees is hard-earned and its constituent elements are as follows: deemphasizing overthinking, which is believed to constitute rlung, or traumatic distress; cultivating a belief that suffering comes from without, not within (an idea that refutes Western cognitivism around trauma); in keeping with the Tibetan cultural trait, not actualizing negativity by actively verbalizing it; practicing a sense of humour. Some of the responses collected in the

Lewis study shed light on the complex workings of this coping mechanism. Sonam, a young man, says that his best friend died on the journey to India. He credits his monastic training with ameliorating the impact of this bereavement, enabling him to focus on the fact that while it was a profound loss for him, only one person died in the group despite all the risks the perilous journey had presented. Pema, a forty-year-old woman, states that she overcame her raw grief of losing her mother through two pragmatic approaches: acknowledging the finality of death (“no matter how much I cried or called my mother, she wouldn’t come back”); and realising that in the sea of affliction around her, “I wasn’t the only motherless child” (329-30). Tsering Norbu, a sixty-four-year-old man, remembers a monk visiting him in prison, where he was being beaten and tortured. The lama asked him to cultivate compassion for the torturer, an exhortation that struck Norbu as absurd at first. Over time, however, he subscribed to the principle of Buddhism the monk had propagated, namely, buddhanature, achieving a mind free of obscuration, luminous and primordial. “This immense compassion exists whether I can see it or not” (331). The coping mechanisms described by Lewis (and Vahali) do not indicate a lack of depressive or posttraumatic stress disorders among the Tibetan refugees. Instead, these accounts show that suffering and resilience may coexist in the lives of the abandoned and excommunicated where departures from the site of the originary trauma--that of expulsion from the homeland--is fraught with new perplexities of risk, precarity, and insecurity.

Written in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, internal displacement, and the movement of nearly four million refugees caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, this essay tries to imagine what critical interpretation of a certain kind of refugee trauma might mean when trauma, which Tanya Luhrmann has called the “great psychiatric narrative of our era”

(722), itself faces a revision and renovation of its biomedical, epistemological, and psychical definitions in different locales. Ethnographic work on mental health in the Tibetan refugee community by Lewis, Ellen Sachs, Maaïke Terheggen, and others translate local idioms efficiently to provide pathways to singular vulnerabilities of bodies as well as alternative technologies of trauma cure. I am arguing that spoken encounters of the kind we see in Vahali's oral histories be imagined as a form of psychoanalysis, one that recuperates narratives not precipitately captured, normalized, and cured by treatment protocols based on PTSD symptomatology. Honey Oberoi Vahali ends Lives in Exile with the hopeful observation that psychoanalysis has moved away from defining itself as a scientific quest "in search of intra-psychic truth" to "acknowledging the significance of the 'unknowable' and appreciating the inter-subjective relational genesis of all forms of existence" (333). In solidarity with that collective future, and for it to materialize at all, psychoanalysis will need to continue to rethink its intermediacy between the self and external phenomena, theory and politics, and the analytical and the material.

NOTES

1 Drawing on the work of Orlando Patterson, Judith Butler calls this form of human precariousness "social death," which she elaborates in works such as Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? and The Psychic Life of Power. See also Patterson.

2 According to Central Tibetan Administration statistics, approximately 150,000 Tibetans live in the neighboring countries of Bhutan, Nepal, and India; 94,000 live in India. Ten years after the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1949, Tibetans began their exodus to Dharamsala, a Himalayan town in north India. See Sachs et al. for a detailed discussion of the

phenomenon, including the reasons that may have prompted this movement.

3 Vahali is referencing Erik H. Erikson essay “Identity and Uprootedness in our Time.”

4 Caruth is referring to Lacan’s influential reading of the dream of the burning child in Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams in his Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis.

Lacan argues that the father’s deeply distressing dream of his child approaching him with *Father, don’t you see I’m burning?* is not interrupted by reality (the glare from the corpse of the child, accidentally set on fire by a burning candle). The dream was not simply fashioned to prolong the dreamer’s sleep: the traumatic awakening, in Lacan’s version, happened in the dream itself, with the beseeching child presenting a horror more unbearable than the reality of the dead child in flames. The dreamer doesn’t escape to the dream, but escapes from the Lacanian Real presenting itself in the dream.

5 Laplanche and Pontalis offer three definitions of binding, the second contradicting the first, the first and third working more harmoniously: a relation between several terms, linked by an associative chain, through which energy flows; fixation of a certain amount of energy that can no longer flow freely; the idea of a whole in which cohesion is maintained by specific delimitation (52).

6 Segal writes of another reaction, too, whereby the death instinct becomes “the drive to annihilate the need, to annihilate the perceiving experiencing self, as well as anything that is perceived” (55).

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