



Grief, Denial, and Racial Violence in the COVID-19 Pandemic (Part III)

For Part I: I become inscrutable to myself

For Part II: No sacrifice is excessive

III. Finding a relational home

In the previous section, I argued that the war metaphor engenders a derealizing self and other relation that precludes the realization of our interdependency and the ethics of nonviolence conditioned by loss. In this final section, I ask the question in what ways the pandemic could be said to be lastingly traumatic. I ask this in order to explore what seems to be a further, imminent, and inevitable repression of our feelings of loss and grief, which I argue we can expect to accompany the end of the pandemic.

To begin, there is an uncanny way in which during the pandemic certain aspects of the external world (by which I mean our experience in and of society) have come to feel like reflections of our internal or psychic reality. I argue that this is the result of a kind of misrecognition that is occurring on the level of our experience of the world, and what anticipates the complete repression of our experience of loss with the lifting of social distancing and other pandemic era policies. To make my argument, I turn to the work of Robert Stolorow, a philosopher and psychoanalyst who has written about the phenomenology of emotional trauma and trauma's context-embeddedness. It is worth acknowledging explicitly that much more has been written about the subject of trauma than is discussed here. The association between pandemics and mental illness, including trauma and stress-related disorders, has also been described (see, e.g., Xiao et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2007). My primary focus continues to be trying to understand the pandemic in terms of its psychic and social dimensions, especially in terms of its self and other relations. It is for this reason that Stolorow's articulation of emotional trauma as "relationally conceived" and embedded or "constituted in an intersubjective context" interests me greatly (2015, p. 125). This is where I will begin.

Stolorow writes:

[T]he unbearable of emotional suffering cannot be explained solely, or even primarily, on the basis of the intensity of the painful feelings evoked by an injurious event. Painful emotional states become unbearable when they cannot find a context of emotional understanding – what I came to call a relational home – in which they can be shared and held. Severe emotional pain that has to be experienced alone becomes lastingly traumatic and usually succumbs to some form of emotional numbing. (2015, pp. 124-125)

More so than the "intensity of the painful feelings evoked," it is whether painful emotional states can find "a context of emotional understanding," or "a *relational home*" in which those emotional states can be "shared and held," that determines their "unbearability" and thus their ability to qualify as traumatic. This relational or contextual conceptualization of emotional trauma is notable in that it does not depend on narrow definitions of what "an injurious event" is. So long as the resultant emotional suffering "has to be experienced alone," it has the potential to become "lastingly traumatic" and subject to "emotional numbing." Repression becomes the logical end of the isolating effects of emotional trauma.

Stolorow argues that emotional trauma anticipates repression through two distinct but related processes: first, through the way “affect states take on enduring, crushing meanings” (2015, p. 125); second, through “a severe constriction and narrowing of the horizons of emotional experiencing” (2015, p. 126). Interestingly, it is possible to “read” the war metaphor as more or less accomplishing both these processes within our experience of the pandemic.

With regards to the first, Stolorow writes that a consequence of emotional trauma is that “[a] defensive self-ideal is often established, representing a self-image purified of the offending affect states that were perceived to be unwelcome or damaging to caregivers” (2015, p. 126). As we have seen, the war metaphor engenders a defensive ideal of the nation at war. When affect states arise that are felt not to be “in service” of the defensive self-ideal (we think of emotions like boredom, anger, doubt, weariness, even sadness), they become “experienced as a failure to embody the required ideal, an exposure of... underlying essential defectiveness or badness, and is accompanied by feelings of isolation, shame, and self-loathing” (2015, p. 126). Here then is the risk of allowing the war metaphor to become the dominant narrative through which the pandemic is experienced. In addition to “essential defectiveness or badness,” one might add also accusations of being unpatriotic, even a danger to the nation at war. Thus, it could be said that the war metaphor enacts the way in which emotional trauma compounds itself through ensuring the continued isolation of the traumatized individual.

The second consequence of emotional trauma follows logically and is the way in which those aspects of emotional experience felt to be “intolerable to the caregiver” (in the case of the pandemic, those affect states felt to be incompatible with the narrative generated by the state’s use of the war metaphor) “must then be sacrificed in order to *safeguard* the needed tie” (2015, p. 126, my emphasis). The war metaphor works by interpellating the individual as a citizen of the nation at war. It thus creates an *ideological* tie, which becomes the intersubjective context that determines what “feels unacceptable, intolerable, or too dangerous” (2015, p. 126) and thus what must be excluded, repressed. Stolorow’s serendipitous use of the word “safeguard,” which appeared at the start of this essay, allows us to make a further argument: in the urge to “safeguard the needed tie” to the nation, it is not only affect states that come to be seen as intolerable or dangerous, but also groups of people, who come to embody those very same qualities. Repression of the kind perpetuated by the war metaphor inevitably perpetuates a dehumanizing view of the Other. In this sense, George Floyd’s death becomes a tragic reminder of the materiality of ideology, the way in which ideology is reified by institutions, embodied in individuals, and enacted in our everyday lives.

Stolorow is perhaps most helpful to us when he provides a phenomenological description of emotional trauma, that is, the lived, embodied, subjective experience of emotional trauma. This begins with the “sense of estrangement and isolation... of alienation and aloneness” (2015, p. 129). One feels as if “an unbridgeable gulf” has opened up between oneself and others, others who “could never even begin to fathom my experience” (2015, pp. 128-129). Stolorow argues that such feelings arise in large part from the loss of what he calls the “absolutisms of everyday life,” the

belief revealed in statements like, “I’ll see you later,” or “I’ll see you in the morning,” that we can safely assume an ontological and existential security. I quote at length:

It is in the essence of emotional trauma that it shatters these absolutisms, a catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one’s sense of being-in-the-world... deconstruction of the absolutisms of everyday life exposes the inescapable contingency of existence... no safety or continuity of being can be assured... the traumatized person cannot help but perceive aspects of existence that lie well outside the absolutized horizons of normal everydayness... the worlds of traumatized persons are felt to be fundamentally incommensurable with those of others, the deep chasm in which an anguished sense of estrangement and solitude takes form.

(Stolorow, 1999, as cited in Stolorow, 2015, p. 129)

Here, we are reminded of the language Butler uses to describe the loss of First World presumption, in her words, “the loss of a certain horizon of experience, a certain sense of the world itself as an entitlement” (Butler, 2003, p. 27). Indeed, the pandemic has shattered any illusion of national immunity as an absolutism – “no safety or continuity of being can be assured.” We are left exactly with “the inescapable contingency of existence,” unable not to “perceive aspects of existence that lie well outside the absolutized horizons of normal everydayness.”

What remains, Stolorow writes, after the loss of the absolutisms of everyday life is a kind of Heideggerian anxiety, a “Being-toward-death” in which death ceases to be “an event that has not yet occurred or that happens to others... Rather, it is a distinctive possibility that is constitutive of our existence” (2015, p. 131). To Being-toward-death Stolorow adds “Being-toward-loss” given the “equiprimordiality of death and loss” – “[j]ust as, existentially, we are ‘always dying already,’ so too are we always already grieving. Death and loss are existentially equiprimordial. Existential anxiety anticipates both death and loss” (2015, p. 132). Ultimately, exposure of our being-toward-death-and-loss results in “the feeling of uncanniness, in the sense of ‘not-being-at-home,’” which forms the basis for the feeling of estrangement, alienation, and solitude in emotional trauma (2015, p. 130).

Thus far, I have made an argument for why the pandemic could be said to be traumatic. This includes the way the pandemic has caused a loss of our First World presumption, revealing our Being-toward-death and Being-toward-loss. It also includes the way the war metaphor facilitates the movement from painful affect states to trauma through the promotion of repression. To dissect trauma in this way into its component parts is meaningful in and of itself. I do so also in order to make a further argument, which is that there is a way each aspect of Stolorow’s phenomenology of emotional trauma has come to be reified in society, in the “real” or “external” world. This is problematic, I argue, because reification of this sort preserves a connection along which a misrecognition can occur, a misrecognition that completes the process of repression.

We enumerate the evidence: I feel a “sense of estrangement and solitude” because I am traumatized by the pandemic, but the distance (six feet) I stand apart from others is real. I feel alone because for weeks I stayed at home, where I live alone. Because I am traumatized, I find

myself thinking about my own death as well as the people I love dying; meanwhile, I have come to view the entire world as potentially having a fatal meaning (Is this bench safe to sit on? Am I standing too close to this stranger? When will we be able to hug?). I find myself unable to shake this “feeling of uncanniness... of ‘not-being-at-home’” in the world anymore, then I look at photos of the empty streets of New York City and feel as if civilization has come to an end (Kimmelman, 2020). My “sense of being-in-the-world” has changed completely; our lives grow increasingly virtual. Somehow, the world I see around me has come to reflect the way I feel inside. On one hand, it is comforting; on the other, it sustains my suffering.

What we must remember is that here we are talking about two different sets of experiences, two levels of experience. First is the changes wrought on one’s subjective experience of being-in-the-world by emotional trauma – a phenomenological level of experience. Second is the effects of the social policies and public health measures invented and enacted by societies for the purpose of limiting the spread of a viral infection – a social level of experience. There is a way in which these two sets of experiences may feel similar, even result in similar feelings, but in no way are they interchangeable.

I argue we are faced with two challenges. First is the way misrecognition sustains itself in the mind, thwarting any casual attempt to dismantle it. This is because of the way it implements the same self-perpetuating process that keeps trauma unconscious – by arising in isolation and being kept from resolution by isolation. It could be said that there are two movements in a reciprocal relationship: the first, where we misrecognize our psychic reality with our experience of society; the second, where our experience of society sustains the experience of our psychic reality. The first is a function of the way trauma (even if collective, as occurs in a pandemic) is experienced by the self in isolation, the second a function of the way that, in the absence of a relational home, trauma is perpetuated and repressed.

The second challenge has to do with what we can expect will happen to our experience of trauma when the social reality we live in begins to change. It is helpful here to illustrate using an example. As has been discussed, in trauma, there is a loss of the absolutisms of everyday life. What we are left with is a kind of Heideggerian anxiety, a Being-toward-death to which Stolorow adds Being-toward-loss. It is the nature of the misrecognition of our psychic reality for our social reality that we have come to believe that the anxiety we feel and our being-toward-death-and-loss are inherent attributes of the pandemic and the public health measures implemented in response. Thankfully, the pandemic cannot last forever. Soon, we will no longer need to socially distance. The nation will “reopen” (as if all of society were a store). Even the idea of a “new normal” assumes a recovery. We have only to wait until then and the anxiety we feel will go away. If it does not, will we realize that we got it wrong? More likely, we will find new ways to repress our anxiety, new ways to deny our experience of trauma. The same applies to our sense of estrangement and solitude, our exposure to the contingency of existence, our feeling of uncanniness, of not-being-at-home. This is how the misrecognition of our phenomenological and social realities anticipates the total repression of loss, in fact how it will drive the process of repression to completion.

In the end, we return to Butler. Of all the consequences of repression, one seems especially dangerous: if loss reveals my fundamental relationality and differential vulnerability, repression of loss is how I begin again to imagine that I can choose not to be for the Other, only for myself. This has implications for both our ability to rethink community and international relations after the pandemic and our ability to fight racism and xenophobia. What Stolorow helps us understand is that grief may be able to “[furnish] a sense of political community of a complex order... by bringing to the fore [our] relational ties” (Butler, 2003, p. 12), but that grief must first be shared, held, prevented from becoming lastingly traumatic. It seems likely that soon we will find ourselves “returned” to a world not unlike the one we started the pandemic in, except we will feel isolated and alone and unsure why. Stolorow’s concept of a relational home is perhaps the operative one. Will society returned to the way it was suffice? If not, what would a society that qualifies as a relational home look like?

Conclusion

We are faced today with an opportunity – as I have said, an opportunity we must demand, for the alternative is violence – “to grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics.” It is a misconception that grief work is private, is work done alone, and is therefore depoliticizing. How we relate to others, how we grieve the loss of others, how we live in society – these are aspects of psychic life of the utmost importance, which it could be said are rapidly being reconfigured as a result of the pandemic. What I have tried to show in this essay is how psychoanalytic theory and dynamically oriented practice could play a role in bringing forth a more just, equitable, and ethical global society after the pandemic. What does it mean to feel the losses we have suffered, the way in which we are held in relation to the Other? How do we prevent our patients from falling into the derealizing self and other relation engendered by the war metaphor, which denies our experience of loss and conditions violence toward the Other? How do we create a relational home for our patients so as to prevent the pandemic from becoming lastingly traumatic? What about for society?

In the end, these are our demands: After the curve of new cases falls to zero, let us not see that as the end but the beginning of mourning. Let us not pretend, even after the last social distancing policies have been lifted, that we are not each alone still feeling isolated and estranged. Let us not forget that violence against the Other is always first violence against oneself. Let us grieve, even as we celebrate our return to the world. Let us travel down the intersecting vectors captured in the phrase: loss opens us to the world.

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