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Mapping Social Memory

A Psychotherapeutic Psychosocial Approach

Nigel Williams

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Foreword

In a talk given in Vienna in 2020 to commemorate the anniversary of Freud's death, Jacqueline Rose reflected on how Freud was shaped by living through the global pandemic of 1918, two world wars, and the necessary losses these events entailed for his family. Commenting on Freud's internal struggles, Rose states that she "became acutely aware of the way the disasters of history penetrate and are repudiated by the mind" (2020, np). She goes on to note that psychoanalysis begins with "a mind in flight", because of the inherent ability of the human mind to take the measure of its own pain, and she offers rich illustrations from Freud's own writings of the difficulties Freud had experienced in holding on to a capacity for thought as political disasters loomed and inconsolable personal losses weighed him down. Rose traces a trajectory in Freud's writing from valorizing self-preservation and mastery as core elements of his theory of psychoanalysis to acknowledging the power of the repetition compulsion and the apparent human capacity for destruction embodied in the death instinct. Drawing on Freud's paper "A phylogenetic fantasy," suppressed by Freud but finally published in 1985, Rose notes how far

Freud shifted from *science* to *feeling* in acknowledging the phylogenetic and genealogical origins of contemporary psychic suffering:

> What passes through the generations, then, deep within the psyche of the people, is anxiety. Anxiety in response to an imperilled world, but also as a reaction to the tyranny of the powers that come to meet it. This is what children usher down through the generations: 'the children bring along the anxiousness of the beginning of the Ice Age.' The child is repeating the history of the species, offering Freud support in his belief in phylogenetic transmission—the 'preponderance of the phylogenetic disposition over all other factors'. An emphasis which, he also insists, does not eliminate the question of acquisition: 'It only moves it into still earlier prehistory.' What this strange unpublished meditation allows us to infer is that the concept of phylogenesis is his way of acknowledging the parlous state of mankind: want, poverty affliction and trouble, the catastrophes of history, the burden of the past. Modern-day psychoanalysis talks of 'transgenerational haunting', the unconscious passage of historical trauma from one generation to the next. We bring our ancestors trailing behind us, which means that, while we may die our own death, we also die on behalf of others who were there before us. Once more way ahead of his time, Freud has taken this reality, which is now clinically recognised, and injected it into the bloodstream of humankind. (Rose, 2020, np)

Acknowledging the death instinct entails, as Rose notes, coming to terms with the darker aspects of our own being and accepting that the forces of darkness that underlie colonialism, genocide, fascism, ecocide, and other forms of mass violence, are rooted in each one of us. Can a society possibly heal from the consequences of slavery, for example, without owning historical patterns of colonial conquest by ancestors as well as acknowledging the white supremacist hatred within white people, and within the institutions and systems in which white people seek comfort and belonging? (O'Loughlin, 2020). What are the consequences if we avert our eyes? By failing to subvert the colonial gaze are we not paving the way for a repetition?

The *feeling* versus *scienc*e struggle manifests in psychohistorical research and memory studies as the polarity between socially-based psychoanalytic and critical inquiry on the one hand, and positivist forms

of anthropology and history on the other. This tension is readily evident in one of my own areas of inquiry. Born in Ireland, I have an interest in Irish history, and particularly in the psychological sequelae of chosen traumas (cf. Volkan, 2001) such as Ireland's Great Famine. The term "Famine" is highly contested as Britain exported large quantities of livestock and grain during the period, suggesting either genocidal intent or, at best, a Malthusian indifference to the lives of its colonized subjects. In a recent paper I summarized the state of Famine scholarship this way:

> The potato was the almost exclusive diet of the poorest segments of the population. From 1845 to at least 1850 Ireland suffered successive catastrophic failures of the potato crop because during those years climatic conditions were ideal for repeated outbreaks of blight caused by what was identified forty years later to be the fungus **phytophthora infestans**. There had been prior crop failures and scattered famines during the previous century, but a cascade of failures, beginning in 1845, led to mass starvation among the poorest segments of the population. Approximately one million people died of starvation and famine related diseases including typhus and cholera, under the most appalling conditions. Many more fled the country in the steerage compartments of often perilously inadequate sailing ships, sometimes referred to as coffin ships. Following 150 years of silence by the government of Ireland, a period in which only desultory attempts were made at commemoration, this famine finally became a speakable trauma in the mid-1990s. Irish historians, too, had been silent. Cecil Woodham-Smith's (1962) bestselling book *The Great Hunger*, written by a scholar outside the academic establishment, was derided by Irish historians. Woodham-Smith broke two taboos: She documented in painful detail the emotional toll of the Famine and she laid considerable responsibility at the door of Sir Charles Trevelyan, the British civil servant ultimately responsible for Famine relief. This counternarrative threatened a comfortable status quo of denial and studied silence within both the Irish government and the academy (Kinealy, 2006). Official commemoration of the Famine and critical scholarship on that national catastrophe were not to emerge until the mid-1990s in Ireland. It appears that a culture of silence, censure, and negation reigned in official Ireland. This left little room for interiority, emotional soothing, reckoning with losses, or any recognition of the ways in which linkages between current personal and national suffering and genealogical and ancestral

> lineages of the kind discussed earlier might have facilitated mourning. (O'Loughlin, in press)

As new scholarship has emerged, influenced by cultural anthropology, psychoanalysis, psychosocial studies, and feminist and postcolonial studies, the ensuing interest in feelings and psychological remnants has produced a burgeoning of new ways of thinking about memory, memorialization, and cultural and transgenerational transmission of trauma in Irish Famine studies. In my own work, for example, I embrace folklore, poetry, and music, as well as oral history and autobiographical introspection as legitimate forms of evidence that can illuminate the psycho-historical record. Particularly relevant to the Irish context is the issue of language loss. For a variety of complex reasons, including the cultural genocide associated with colonization, the Irish language came close to annihilation. Reckoning with the massive cultural severance this entailed—what de Fréine (1978) called *The Great Silence*—Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill speaks eloquently to the need to come to terms with this buried past: "Famine and the trauma of colonisations is something that we are finally coming to terms with. It is as if we are waking up from a state of zombification, of a waking death where we had no emotional memory of who it was that we were or what it was that happened to us" (1993, p. 69). Speaking of a visit to Ireland's National Famine Museum, she summarized the lack thus:

> Is it any wonder, therefore, that I leave the museum somewhat dissatisfied, as I always am when faced with memories of that time, by a sense of overwhelming and unconscionable loss? Unconscionable, because of what has been lost to consciousness, not just the tunes, and the songs and the poetry, but because the memory that they were all in Irish—and that they are part of a reality which was not English—has been erased so totally from our minds. This seems to be part of the Famine trauma which is still not acknowledged by the post-colonial Irish reality. This collective memory-loss, this convenient amnesia is still one of the most deeply-etched results of the Famine. (1993, p. 72)

Despite these eloquent pleas it is disheartening that Irish historians such as Foster (2004) and Ó'Gráda (2001), and cultural historians of the

Famine such as Mark-Fitzgerald (2013) are skeptical that psychoanalysis or trauma theory can inform historical studies, with Foster going so far as to dismiss any study of melancholic residue or transgenerational transmission as psychobabble.

How then are people who have been estranged from their genealogical, linguistic, and mythic origins, people whose autobiographic consciousness has been erased, to regain a foothold in history? Davoine and Gaudillière (2004) speak of bringing back the voices of the dead, of acknowledging the spectral *revenants* of which Derrida (2006) speaks. Similarly, Abraham and Torok are clear on the need to investigate the phantomic presences at the root of ancestrally and genealogically inherited suffering:

> The concept of the phantoms moves the focus of psychoanalytic inquiry beyond the individual being analyzed because it postulates that some people unwittingly inherit the secret psychic substance of their ancestor's lives… redraw[ing] the boundaries of psychopathology and extend[ing] the realm of possibilities for its cure by suggesting the existence within an individual of a collective psychology comprised of several generations. So that the analyst must listen to the voices of one generation in the unconscious of another. (1994, p. 166)

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Derek Walcott (1992) reminds us of the beauty and possibility of such genealogical work. Speaking of the polyglot culture of his native Antilles, and the pain stitched into its history, he outlines the reparative possibilities thus:

> Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain that their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is thus restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our

> archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent. (1992, np)

Nigel Williams' erudite book is a meditation on memory that is consistent with the spirit of Walcott's vision. Nigel's ambition is to account for the sociohistorical origins of subjectivity. He explores the kinds of subject formation that emerge from migrations, displacements, language loss, severance of social linkages, and the "unhappy internment" of family, community, and national traumas. His literature review is comprehensive and evocative and seeks to reach for an articulation of a mourning and a reclamation of spirits that obviates melancholia and leads to generativity and subjective possibility. In addition to exploring relevant literature across a wide range of disciplines, Nigel incorporates narratives from a diverse array of conversational partners so that this work is grounded in the hopes, lives, and hauntings of living people—a process that Nigel refers to as research in action. While grounded in a vision of reconciliation and dialogue, Nigel's work does not shy away from the difficult political questions of decolonization and of how societies may become hardened in a Kleinian paranoid-schizoid manner where dialog is foreclosed and where possibilities for affiliation, mutual understanding, mentalization of past traumas, and reparation are purposely occluded.

Nigel is a psychotherapist. In addition to speaking to the social implications for communities, societies, and nations he takes us into the consulting room and explores in detail the complex issue of engaging psychotherapy patients with the ghosts of their pasts. Preoccupied not only with the question of where generational suffering goes, Nigel seeks to articulate a therapy which allows such demetaphorized affect and what Garon (2004) calls *skeletons in the closet* to be reclaimed, named, and metabolized. Drawing on the language of hauntology Nigel understands that ghosts must be invited in and he offers an eloquent discourse on the critical role of attuned listening and the importance for therapists who are to become cultural and ancestral interlocutors of developing a refined autobiographic consciousness.

As I write these words, the entire world is in the grip of a pandemic the management of which has been characterized by necropolitical callousness, managerial ineptness, and a striking opportunism by too many

world leaders. It will create another traumatic residue for our world to absorb. Will this, too, become an unspeakable tragedy—one in which older people, people of limited means, and people who have already been deprived of opportunity because of their racial or ethnic origins, become further burdened with unnamable suffering? Nigel's book, written in an engaging critical voice, and drawing on a lifetime of attuned, humble listening is a reminder that our world might be otherwise, and that we should struggle hard to fight for an ethic of care and a true psychology of reminisces and a reclamation of lore that will allow people to embrace their pasts and hence live their lives more freely.

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Preface

The personal inspiration for this book is to do with my own interest in ancestry. I have researched both sides of my family and through this exploration have had several surprising and unexpected meetings with living relatives, my ancestors and descendants of some of their friends. I mention friends because I am not deeply enamoured with the idea of bloodlines. I'm as happy with a lateral movement through the records which has allowed me to meet people who were descended from friends of my grandfather or my great-great-grandmother for example. In this sense I am curious: I want living history, not a done-and-dusted family tree. Ancestry, like life, is messy.

Meeting people from the past is rarely a neutral experience. I have been moved to tears by some of the things my ancestors went through and did to themselves and others. I found that I met them through what they had done, decisions and actions taken for better or worse. I have often wondered why I continued with my quest. Looking back now, I realise that a series of attachments had formed inside me to people I had never met. I felt compelled to get to know them better. Sometimes they seemed to speak to me, particularly throughout the tedious process of

record-based research. I made some odd and intuitive leaps. Looking at the conclusion of this book, I'd now say that I had learned to use my sociological imagination. In doing so I felt 'increased', as if there were more of me than when I started studying ancestry.

My professional life has been in psychotherapy. I offer this detail as a caveat and for context. As a psychodynamic psychotherapist I am interested in the past in the present, and this book is in step with my working model. I have an interest in loss, mourning and creativity—these themes are staples in the psychodynamic tradition. I was less familiar with haunting (a key theme in this book) and tended to think about the more troubled side of human psychic life—psychosis, dissociation, trauma, abuse—in very personal terms, or not influenced by any wider a circle than the family of the individual involved. As a therapist I know that without a grasp of the details of people's lives and experiences, no real work is possible. Writing this book has stretched and sometimes redefined this latter assumption, for which I am grateful.

My experience of engaging with my ancestors has brought a sense of increase. I recognise some of my own strengths and weaknesses and some familial and less familiar traits and talents. I know more people than I knew before; my network is deeper and wider. This book and its central argument is a product of this expanded viewpoint and the key idea of intergenerational companionship comes out of it. The idea is not new, but it does come out of my experience and the experiences of people I have talked to during the research.

Are some of the ideas wild and unrealistic? I hope so! I am, after all, an idealistic and political animal. Many of my ancestors and their friends were too, and on occasion it got them into big trouble!

There is a slightly self-conscious concept in psychosocial research called 'wild analysis' where, because of the subjective methodology, data may be constructed in a self-fulfilling way or over interpreted. Psychotherapy is vulnerable to similar problems, and supervision is the usual control. In relation to research it is broadly the same; collegial oversight sometimes passes by the technical name of 'triangulation of data'. In the psychosocial tradition, this is typically done in Balint groups (Salinsky, 2013) to maximise the peer collaborative components and the

all-important element of 'free association' alongside the routine discipline of hypothesis formation.

Talking of free association, that staple of psychodynamic therapeutic practice, the capacity to use one's imagination in the presence of another is a very useful way of exploring what is happening with people in many other settings. More recently it has become evident to me that it is very useful when thinking about things as well, such as buildings or technical systems. To someone artistically or poetically trained, this will be no surprise. Since Keats, we have had a term for it: 'negative capability'. Since the Surrealist movement, we have been able to see it and experiment with imaginatively informed inquiry.

Memory is a deeply contested subject both in ordinary life and in the sciences. In writing this book I have picked out the theoretical and research strands that in my view make the most sense when thinking about the multigenerational transmission of memory. In Chapter 1, I introduce a narrative on memory and how it works, weaving a story as well as defining some key ideas. These ideas are discussed in more depth in Chapter 2. I alternate between narrative and exposition throughout the book: it is a way of writing that I hope will help readers, whether academics, therapists or students, find the book accessible.

This book is at root an invitation to imagine, to enter a social and psychological trance about our ancestors and forebears. It is a book about social memory, remembering and forgetting. It also anticipates a future in which thinking about several generations at once might be more commonplace for our social cohesion and survival.

Any wild analysis or overly free interpretations in this book are entirely my own. On a more technical note, in a book with a subject matter as complex and wide ranging as this one, there will be gaps and contradictions. Like the generations themselves, it is a work in a progress.

Since a research project sits behind the book, I would like to acknowledge separately the enthusiasm and interest that those who have taken part in the study have shown. Without their participation, this survey

would have been much reduced and the ideas less grounded in social and psychological reality.

Bristol, UK
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Nigel Williams

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About the Author

Nigel Williams has been a psychotherapist for forty years. He initially trained as a social scientist and in the last sixteen years has worked at the University of the West of England, helping to train psychologists and counsellors in psychodynamic approaches to therapy and psychosocial approaches to research. He is co-editor with Anne-Marie Cummins of *Further Researching Beneath the Surface* (Routledge, 2018) and his focus on ancestry is reflected his writing about migration and diaspora.

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