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Psychoanalysis Moving in Places It Rarely Goes: To the Meantime and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

Since its beginnings, Psychoanalysis has grown and extended its knowledge but not its reach; it has been less successful working for all people than it has working for a select group of people. In present day, we are beginning to see a change: Psychoanalysis' proponents, practitioners, and institutes are beginning to bring psychoanalytic self and work into spaces where it has been less accessible. This paper highlights the need to bring the generative *betweenness* that emerges in a successful psychoanalytic treatment, between analyst and analysand, to diverse groups of people and to inter-group relationships within society and outside of it, including those living in the Meantime.

It's been well over a year now since I've seen my swim students, the unaccompanied, displaced girls from Camp Moria, on the island of Lesbos, Greece. "Meanwhile," the Meantime gets meaner: the horrors worsen, and lives continue to be lost as a result of violence; lack of medical care, food, and shelter; and a short supply of aid and aid workers.

The specific memories of my experience and images of unaccompanied girls' individual faces have faded. This past summer (2020), I was planning to return and resume my work as a swim teacher. I'd planned to collaborate with educators and social workers on the ground to incorporate a psychoanalytic, educational trauma training for teachers at the local school. But the COVID pandemic prevented that, along with recent violence that erupted when local residents violently attacked both refugees and aid workers.

Yet, the felt-memory of my experience has not dimmed; what was born from the *betweenness* we shared — created through play when the girls and I swam together in the Aegean Sea — still lives within me. As does the connection I developed with Ali, the young Yemeni refugee, and other Responsibilities I met there and with whom I also forged a bond. However, it's my deep fear and dread that it is *I* who benefitted most from the experience — that the salves of care and the fertile, generative *betweenness* that was co-created between the girls and me did not go far enough. They did not come close enough to begin to resuscitate good internal objects and transitional space in these girls — in the self — enough for them to create hope and meaning and preserve the sacred core of the self.

The subtle world that exists between subjects needs time and space to grow. The treasures found and developed in the *betweenness* holds and nurtures the self and her sacred core. And if the sacred core does not communicate, as Winnicott poses, it must *reveal* for the self

to live. But without an other *to see with* or *see us*, revelations (not lessons) that are birthed from recognition and shared experience, remain unformed — unseen and unknown.

Imagination is dependent on friendly objects: subjective, transitional, and good internal and external objects. Together, these friends unite and invite imagination's greatest friend: *Possibility*. But if all these friends of the self — one by one or all together — disappear, and no one remains to play, no living friend to care, the self slowly bleeds out in the Meantime. On September 8, 2020, this is what transpired for the displaced people of Camp Moria.

On this day, Camp Moria was burnt to the ground, all its residents forced to flee, once more, for their lives. This time, there was nowhere to go except the streets of the small town just outside of the Camp. COVID spread. No food or water for days. Some male local residents of Lesvos formed gangs and perpetuated murderous attacks against refugees and humanitarian workers. They were not deterred by local authorities. Responsibles were attacked and told to leave the island; some of their homes were burned and they were warned never to return.

Anne refused to leave and holed up in her house, alone, for over two months. Her Greek neighbors, other Responsibles, continued delivering her blankets and other supplies for the displaced, as she had done for years. The children's social worker secured one of the last flights out to Athens before the airport shut down. After she told me that before she left the island, her and her boyfriend's lives were threatened by a local gang member, I asked if she was prepared to go back to the island. "I cannot abandon the children," she said. "I could not live with myself. If I do not go back. They have no one now, so many humanitarian workers have left and will not be returning." While in Athens, she was able to communicate, via texting, with the children and the Greek Responsibles who remained on the island, doing their best to care for and protect the children. Anne was determined to offer the children a lifeline, however thin.

The other Responsibles who remained on the island assisting refugees were fellow refugees who were also struggling to survive on the streets without food, clothes, or shelter. Some reported that a few local gangs had deceived groups of refugees into believing they would be transported to safety, to Athens, by boat. After the refugees followed them to the shore and boarded the awaiting inflatable dinghies, they were cast out to sea to die. Trauma and inhumanity, writ larger. Eventually, the UNHR intervened and Camp Moria is being rebuilt, but the majority of refugees there have not been allowed to relocate, outside of the Meantime. We don't know how many have died, and the overall response from nation states has been neglectfully and tragically silent.

Slivers of hope emerged from the tragedy: Germany and France agreed to allow unaccompanied children from Camp Moria to move to other locations in the EU, where their hopes for asylum increased and more resources will be allotted. Ali was allowed to relocate, too. He continues to await asylum in another country, where his chances and hopes are brighter.

I am grateful to Paola Contreras and von Lieres (this issue) for offering other perspectives and interpretations of the Meantime. Contreras elaborates how psychoanalysis might be introduced and function in the Meantime of other societies; she calls for greater participation from psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic psychotherapists to enter those spaces. Meanwhile, von Lieres (this issue) highlights sociopolitical complexities and interpretations of the Meantime, offering a different and illuminating vertex from which to view my experiences and ideas.

Understandably, she casts a suspicious eye on the Responsibles, when western aid workers work in non-democratic spaces and when the disparities in conditions in living and resources are too great between aid worker and refugee. Alongside the Responsibles' ability to be need-mediating objects, she sees a shadow presence infusing their interactions and transactions that emerges from the vestiges of colonialism.

Contreras (this issue) understands what I was trying to accomplish when “I lead and lean into” descriptions of my experience, and why I wanted to tell this story. She understands that I want to “arouse [my] psychoanalytic audience awake and . . . to stay awake” (p. 110) to the social injustices and abuses that are occurring in refugee camps around the world — to imagine how we might bring some of the emancipatory potential of psychoanalysis to the people there.

When I returned home from Greece and began to think about and organize my experience, I asked myself: “What did this experience reveal to me? What do I want to say?” I did not have to wait long for an answer. I immediately thought: “I want to *move* the reader.” I want to demonstrate how psychoanalytic mind, sensibility, and approach can *move* in spaces it rarely goes.

For me, psychoanalysis's richness and transformative power is its ability to assist the self to keep moving, creating, and become affectively and wholly alive. If one has been fortunate to be transformed by psychoanalysis, it's the quality of experience created in the *betweenness*, between analyst and patient, that is retained and remains alive to influence the self throughout life. That's not to say that psychoanalysis can be so easily reduced. It's a complex, complicated, rough-and-tumble process of conscious and unconscious forces that play out in time between dyads and in multiple theaters of therapeutic process and action. As a result, freedom and meaning can also be won, along with aliveness, but only after one faces that which most plagues and pains the self, and after one survives the rawness of it all. But why, as Contreras (this issue) correctly points out, even now, do I need to cover myself by retreating to safe analytic ground to demonstrate to the reader what I *know*? Why do I need to keep proving my analytic chops?

Historically, strong epistemological currents that run deep and undergird psychoanalysis often pushed the ontological, phenomenological theories and approach to the background. In present day, ontological streams and epistemological ones often overlap in the consulting room, and the confluence has resulted in psychoanalysis continuing to move. However, if one looks more closely, there still exists in psychoanalysis an overriding *preference to extend its knowledge than to extend its reach* and a belief that knowledge is the chief contributor to a person changing. Psychoanalytic theories steeped in ontology, including Winnicottian, have historically, and in some psychoanalytic circles today, been cast as being “lightweight” (Ogden, personal communication), compared to those securely based in epistemology. This bias often obfuscates what occurs in the *betweenness* of psychoanalysis, which contributes to the self coming into true being and creating a life of well-being: a life worth living. I wonder if this has something to do with psychoanalysis and analysts being slow to move into work “for the people,” or for more diverse people . . . to move farther afield, farther away from the ivory tower. To make a deeper, stronger connection here may have me going down the wrong rabbit hole, so that is best left for another day. I do think it's worth thinking more about.

As psychoanalysis moves the self, it can also contribute to the formation and life of social *movements* that push society to improve the realities of peoples' lives. It has in the past and it

continues to do so today. To that end, von Lieres muses that social science researchers and psychoanalytic thinkers might join forces more frequently to greater influence political and social structures and, I would add, to strengthen social movements that can change conditions and fortunes of citizens living on the margins of society. Recently, psychoanalytic institutes throughout the world began developing innovative programs to reach more diverse populations. At my own institute, the Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California, we have developed a new Community Psychoanalysis track. Candidates who work within community mental health organizations and want to become psychoanalysts are collaborating with other Bay Area public health leaders and mental health practitioners to support marginalized populations.

The current social movement that exists to free displaced people and make it possible for them to gain asylum, citizenship, and rights is anemic. What will it take to move people's outrage and empathy and transform it into a movement? "Meanwhile," Democratic countries continue to develop systems that keep displaced people from attaining rights; they continue to build and rebuild more Camp Morias throughout the western world to imprison displaced persons. States — most notably, my own country — must make a greater commitment to help end the atrocities inflicted upon displaced people and move to end global, local, and systemic human rights abuses. This is a "universal phenomenon," as von Lieres (this issue) points out, and doesn't just occur with people of the global South.

I appreciate von Lieres's (this issue) work and research on the relationship between citizenship and silence within society's marginalized populations. She illuminates "how political agency is represented and formulated relationally in 'silent citizenship' practices" (p. 105). As with displaced people, society "does not take account of them [silent citizens]" (this issue, p. 105). Both groups demonstrate what she states is a "universal phenomenon": that the powerful majority — their concerns, priorities, and privileges — erase minority rights and foreclose possibility and opportunity for people to move toward the center of society, and not be relegated solely to the margins or outside of it.

However, it's important to differentiate "silent citizens" from displaced people living in detention centers, though they share many things, including both being targets of pernicious discriminatory practices that effectively keep them silent. Whereas the silent citizen lives on the margins of society, the displaced person lives *nowhere* in society. The displaced person living in the Meantime has no ability to return home and lacks the rights to live and integrate into "host" states' communities. No nation state really wants them nor wants to grant them citizenship. They exist in a purgatorial no-man's land, subsisting on care and maintenance programs. But they do not want this; they are desperate to create a meaningful livelihood but are denied the opportunity because host countries place stringent restrictions on refugees' right to work within and without settlements, and their freedom of movement is severely restricted (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). The average duration of living in the Meantime (detention centers) is now estimated at 26 years (Landau & Achiume, 2017). For years, democratic states have applied neoliberal attitudes and principles to the treatment of refugees, demanding "self-reliance" from the refugee, yet states provide no legal avenue, means, or environments to pursue economic autonomy. They are trapped in a double bind of injustice.

If democracy does not exist in the Meantime, as von Lieres rightly points out, should Responsibles from the West refuse to go and assist displaced people until a more democratic

structure is put in place? One that will support the possibility of a more equal and intersubjective exchange and relatedness and avoids reenacting oppressive colonial dynamics? I hope not. The loss of human life and destruction to self would be too great. I do not believe von Lieres is suggesting we need to stay away from the Meantime, but the challenges and inequities found there can easily slide and separate into problematic, either/or binaries with little chance of getting worked through, as relational psychoanalysis would have us keep in mind.

I agree with von Lieres (this issue) that for Responsibles and implicated subjects to be responsive need-mediating objects, “it is important to trace the diverse ways in which [their fundamental] roles shape and mediate the social and psychic encounter” and become more “aware of an intersubjective dimension in complex settings like refugee camps” (p. 107). Inequality is inherent and apparent in encounters and relationships between displaced people and aid workers, particularly when democratic structures and systems are lacking in transit camps, and westerners are unconscious about their implicated responsibility in present day, historical, colonial injustices. Intersubjective dynamics must be mindfully navigated, our complicated and implicated subjectivity *thought about* and progressively worked on, in order to mitigate micro-aggressions that perpetuate injustices and inequality. Most importantly, nation states *must be moved* to invite and include displaced people into democratic society, where they have opportunities to create a home and a livelihood and are afforded rights. This would lead to less compromised and more equitable cross-cultural encounters and exchanges.

In closing, just as Contreras (this issue) implores psychoanalytic thinkers and practitioners to “elevate the voice of the people,” and not just the theory (p. 114), I, too, hope we can do more to bring the transformative healing potential of psychoanalysis to the Meantime, so *betweenness* can be created where it’s most lacking and needed — for *possibility* to be revealed.

Notes on contributor

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