

Haunting legacies: trauma in children of perpetrators

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when Iraq is bombed
and I tell her
how enraged I am
at attacks at civilians
no matter what the reasons
because I remember how it feels
to be a child of six
and live in a city
hit by carpet bombing
surrounded by adults
half crazed with terror and hunger
and when I tell her
how it feels
to crawl out from under
after an air raid
to look down the street
and see whose house was hit
and how I cannot forget
adults whispering in horror
that phosphor bombs
missed the railroad station
and hit the slums instead
and people running through the streets
like living torches
screaming until they jumped
into the river
to drown themselves

[...]
my Greek friend leans back
and I see in her eyes
that I am the child of her enemies
she remembers the atrocities
committed by my people
in her native village
in the mountains of Greece

Excerpts from Ursula Duba, *Tales from the Child of the Enemy*¹

The thoughts I am presenting here are a first attempt to formulate my ideas about the traumatic effects of growing up among a generation of children of a perpetrator nation. I was born in Germany after World War II and grew up in

a small border town in the South, just across from Switzerland at the outer edges of the Black Forest. I am one of the ‘children of the enemy,’ invoked in Ursula Duba’s poem. Unlike her, I experienced the carpet bombing only second hand through endlessly reiterated war stories. My mother and grandmother’s stories about the war have merged with my childhood memories. Memory implants that I retain as the first inscriptions of my history. Every evening they would sit in the living room telling the same stories, over and over again. My memories of these stories have an almost eerie quality of a lived reality. I remember them differently from the way I remember other stories. Almost as if I had lived through them myself, I remember concrete images, details, fragments of a history I must have hallucinated at the time, thus processing my family’s stories as psychic reality. The noise of sirens and approaching bomber planes, people fleeing to the local bunkers or, if it was too late, to their cellars. Children sleeping in apple crates through howling sirens and the crashing of bombs. And, above all, the image of masses of people fleeing the burning city through the rubble of smoking houses and the explosions of bombs. People crying and coughing from smoke, screaming or succumbing to complete disorientation and madness.

I lived the first months of my life with ‘adults half crazed with terror and hunger’ because fear and starvation persisted through the early postwar years. My parents tell me that as an infant I screamed every night for hours on end from the torments of hunger. They were also still crazed with the terror of the war killing their firstborn, their infant son, and leaving their house in smoldering ruins. Many years later, like Duba, I befriended people—Jewish, French, Greek—upon whom my own people had brought war and genocide. I know the feeling of being the child of the enemy all too intimately. I also know what it feels like to belong to a people whose history has come to stand, in the cultural imaginary of the world at large, for evil incarnate. As I write my thoughts down on growing up in postwar Germany, the US has invaded Iraq once again and Iraqi people, including children, have been dying. I’m a Resident Alien in the US now, and as I see the coverage of this new war, memories resurface, the atmosphere of fear and terror, the starvation and despair, the stories of which marked my early childhood years. After we come home from one of the huge peace demonstrations in Los Angeles, my 13-year-old son asks me what I remember from the time after the war. I feel it is time to get my memories and thoughts into a form that I will be able to pass on to him.

At the time I was born in Germany, Allied signs posted all over this recently defeated country read:

Here ends the civilized world.
You are entering Germany.
Fraternizing prohibited.²

Only a few years earlier, an old racist plate, addressed to Jews during the Nazi era, marked the entrance of my home town:

Jews are unwelcome in Tiengen.
Tiengen likes to see foreigners,
But the Jew better remain far away.

Because whatever may drive you,
Remember, Jew,
Tiengen was, is and remains German.³

I was not born yet when the town addressed its Jewish population in this fashion, and too small to be able to read the Allied sign, but indirectly both signs nonetheless passed down a legacy through Germany's cultural unconscious. The Allied sign's legacy is complex and difficult to track. Denying Germany the status of the 'civilized world,' it aligns the German people with a discourse of savagism and barbarism. This discourse continues a familiar legacy of colonialism, casting Germany as the first instance of a 'barbarism' that emerges from *within* the civilized world. While the rhetoric of barbarism suggests that Germany broke away from the values and achievements of Western civilization, the NSDAP in fact, as Agamben and others have convincingly demonstrated, worked within the logic of modernity and used deeply modern elements to generate the Holocaust. Moreover, it seems important to acknowledge that the German Holocaust, even though unmatched in its cold, mechanistic and industrialized machinery of death, draws on a relentless drive to subjugate or annihilate other people that reveals many affinities to Western colonialism and imperialism more generally. Ultimately one would need to ask where the drive to subjugate and annihilate the other comes from, a question that reaches beyond the scope of this article.

However one interprets the Nazi assault on the values of Western civilization, the Allied sign challenges the developmental thesis implied in colonial narratives of civilization and progress, raising not only the question of what causes civilization to be undermined from within, but also another question regarding the role of the Allied forces in relation to the people under occupation whom it declares as 'un-civilized.' In many ways, the Allied forces' rebuilding of Germany, whose major cities had been destroyed and whose surviving people were starving, can be compared to a colonization, entailing political subjugation as well as moral and cultural re-education. We need to be careful, however, in assessing the status of these 'transitional interventions' designed to stop a nation's politics of genocide and aggressive invasion of other countries. They depart in very particular ways from the utterly unwarranted acts of invasion, aggression and genocide committed under colonialism against indigenous people. What Germany witnessed after the war was rather a pervasive cultural re-education and imposition of the values of the occupying forces. Particularly the US and the Soviet Union, the two nations that would eventually become the historical protagonists in a relentless cold war, systematically imposed American and Soviet values and propaganda respectively on the German educational and cultural system in the two divided sectors of the country. The division of Germany, eventually enforced by a concrete wall that cut through its former capital Berlin, into a communist East and a capitalist West, dramatically enacts the conflicts, differences and divisions internal to what current academic discourses often all too easily homogenize as 'the Western tradition.'

Denying Germany its status as a civilized nation rests on a claim that the persecution of Jews and other minorities, the camps and the Holocaust were

aberrations from the values of Western civilization. Recent analyses, particularly Agamben's work, present a systematic attempt to refute this exceptionalist perspective, casting Germany as a significant moment rather than a deviation of Western civilization. Exceptionalism rests on the assumption that Germany was either never part of or fell away from mainstream Western civilization because it never took the political turn toward democratization (or French republicanism) or the philosophical turn toward humanist rationalism. We should also not forget that it was the Nazis themselves who first developed an exceptionalist perspective toward German culture, claiming that since antiquity the Germans had developed their own autarky as a civilization. Whether one embraces an exceptionalist or a non-exceptionalist perspective makes a crucial difference to *how* one looks at the historical trauma suffered by Germany's Jewish, gypsy, homosexual, mentally ill and communist populations who became the victims of the Holocaust. It also makes a difference to *how* one assesses the very different trauma suffered by the German people during World War II and its aftermath.

Finally, it matters whether or not German people see themselves as a deviation from Western civilization when they face or refuse to face their own role in a nation of defeated perpetrators. We know that a pervasive silence weighed on Germany after the war, bespeaking a futile attempt to avoid facing the atrocities of the war. Yet, one cannot escape collective shame and guilt and their transmission across generations. The more the acknowledgement of shame and guilt was silenced in public debates, the more they migrated into the psyche and the cultural unconscious. For the generation of perpetrators, the knowledge of the Holocaust was relegated to a 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi) that became taboo in public debates in any but the most superficial ways. For the postwar generation, it became something like a national secret, only to be revealed as brute fact, usually in the early teens, in the cold abstraction of history lessons. There was virtually no public forum for a deeper confrontation and processing of the issues surrounding the Holocaust.

Seeing Germany from without the exceptionalist grid as part and parcel of the pervasive history of Western colonial and imperial aspirations allows one to acknowledge that, among other things, the Nazi atrocities are only the most perniciously inhuman form of enacting the myth of Western civilization's superiority. The psychic economy of Germany's isolation from the rest of the West is rather transparent, since it allows other countries more easily to avoid confronting their own violent histories and legacies of colonial atrocities and genocide. To take issue with the thesis of German exceptionalism does not mean giving license to turn away from Germany's responsibility for the Holocaust. Rather, it allows one to establish a link between the Holocaust and other histories of violence and genocide. Linking these violent histories is, I think, crucial in order to begin serious thinking about a politics of alliance against oppression, genocide, ethnic cleansing and imperialist invasions of other countries. Moreover, it may finally prepare some ground for a political dialogue between people and nations that have emerged from or still belong to the victims of such oppression and those who resist the oppression of others from within colonial or imperial nations.

Framing my thoughts in this way will allow me to make a similar argument for a dialogical turn in trauma discourses. The latter have commonly focused almost exclusively on the victims of trauma. I think we need trauma discourses that look at the dynamic between victims and perpetrators and see that both of them are suffering from the psychic deformations of violent histories, albeit in different ways and with different responsibilities. Pervasive in violent histories is the transgenerational transmission of trauma, or, as Abraham and Torok put it, a history of ghostly hauntings by the phantoms of a silenced past. This haunting transmission of trauma across generations will be the more narrowly defined focus of my article.

What are possible concrete manifestations of trauma that is transmitted across generations? Let me return to the Nazi sign displayed in what later became my hometown: 'Remember, Jew, Tiengen was, is and remains German.' This warning prominently exhibits the projective fear of Germans of the war generation of a take-over by another culture. This fear was handed down to postwar children along with the visceral dread of starvation and the horrors of listening to endlessly repeated war stories. The Nazi sign also admonished Germans to distinguish between good and bad foreigners. Living in a border town, the citizens of Tiengen couldn't really afford to appear xenophobic, but racism was in vogue and one could boast a racist sign without a trace of shame or pang of conscience. After all, racism was, as always, bound up with patriotism and national pride. The fear that German culture and, perhaps more importantly, German economic monopolies might be taken over by Jews was a familiar excuse to disguise and rationalize Germany's brutal aggression against its German Jewish population as a measure of self-defense. After the war, the fear of a take-over was nearly seamlessly displaced onto the Russians and the communists within Germany. 'Wait until the Russians invade us,' my grandmother used to threaten me when I didn't follow her rules. She also thought the Russians had changed the weather patterns with nuclear experiments. 'They even take over the sky and the clouds,' she used to complain. Like so many Germans at the time, she seemed to have succeeded in 'forgetting' her memory of Hitler's imperial drive to take over Europe only a few years earlier so that it became easy to project it onto the enemy.

It is perhaps telling that I hardly remember any complaints about the take-over of German culture by the US and France, the occupying forces in Southern Germany. Perhaps I should stress that, even though the area where my family lived was under French occupation, we were mainly exposed to the massive infusion of the German cultural and educational sector with North American literature and Hollywood film as well as a great deal of propaganda. The only open critics of such a refashioning of Germany were the teachers of German literature who shunned the Anglicization of German language and forbade us to use 'foreign' words. They also lamented the fact that postwar children grew up without German literature after it had almost instantly been replaced in school curricula with those allegedly 'uncultured' books by new American authors such as Hemingway, Steinbeck or Pearl S Buck. Yet, in defiance of our teachers, we enthusiastically took to American literature, all the more so because I assume that even before we learned about the Holocaust, we had already internalized

that Germany was an inferior nation. At the time I thought I was rebellious and progressive, while in fact I was rather a gullible subject of cultural colonization. This deep ambivalence is symptomatic of the transformation of German culture after the war. Our teachers resisted the colonizing impetus of the American re-education program, but they did so in terms of an old and problematic nationalism. While we students, by contrast, resisted our teachers' nationalism and actively embraced foreign cultures, we also unwittingly submitted to the propagandistic aspects of the re-education program. The fact that American literature formed the core of much of this re-education makes matters even more complicated. The literature we read was itself often ambivalent towards or critical of its own culture. Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck and Pearl Buck, for example, are all authors whose relationship to their own culture is so complex that they can hardly be reduced to a monolithic cultural perspective. Moreover, it was the reception of American literature that reconnected German literature with the modernist and avant-garde movements that were suppressed during the Nazi era. This ambivalence is not unlike the ambivalence Fanon describes about the reception of Shakespeare in colonial education. Literature, we need to remember, is a highly ambivalent and risky tool of colonization or re-education since it can so easily be appropriated for a much more critical reception than the one intended by the powers that be. Reading American literature, therefore, could hardly be seen as a tool of oppression among German postwar children, and it is symptomatic that when I later studied American literature at university I actually returned to the books I grew up with. When I eventually emigrated to the US, I found that I shared a basic canon of literature and other cultural objects, especially Hollywood movies, with my American peers.

The war generation internalized the fear of a take-over as a psychic structure, extending it even to include literature and language more generally. It hence began to become all-pervasive and to operate indiscriminately at a more subliminal level. In some of its aspects, the parental generation displaced this fear onto the generation of postwar children. The parents' fear that the children would take over was, in turn, intimately related to the fear that the silenced history might surface and lead to a confrontation by one's own children—a fear that eventually turned real in the 1960s and 1970s and that gave the student movement in Germany its particular transgenerational dynamic. Given that the war generation had retreated into the treacherous refuge of 'silence,' it is symptomatic that knowledge, education and particularly language became containers for this fear. The very fact that children could claim a voice of their own became threatening to many parents. The German word *Widerrede* refers to one of the worst transgressions of children against their parents. The word means 'talking back' or simply 'arguing.' 'Thou shalt not argue with your parents' as the hallmark of German authoritarian education reaches back of course at least to the Bismarck era. However, this silencing of children took on a new quality and urgency after the war when arguing carried the threat of exposing the parents' active or passive complicity as perpetrators. It was not until the 1960s that this pedagogical ethos was connected with the German people's vulnerability to blind obedience under the Nazi regime. With the publication of Adorno and Horkheimer's *The Authoritarian Character*, authoritarianism became finally

linked in the German social imaginary with a propensity to fascism. In Germany, the 1960s revolutionary activism was therefore thoroughly overdetermined by the postwar generation's first broad public outcry that held the parental generation at large accountable for the Holocaust rather than focusing on a few individual perpetrators who were tried at Nuremberg.

This is the psychological climate of a relentless authoritarianism that still reigned during the postwar era. While any sense of true authority was weakened by the loss of the war, the compensatory use of violence toward 'inferior' or vulnerable members of a community, including children, often escalated exponentially. Supported by the persistent American ethos of allegedly rebuilding the countries the US destroys in a war, Germans after the war moreover engaged almost instantly in an enormous effort at reconstruction, the *Wiederaufbau*. Psychically, these efforts served a veritable manic defense, mobilized to ward off unbearable feelings of loss and defeat, guilt and shame. This manic defense went hand in hand with the ghostly silence about the war atrocities that descended on the defeated nation, a silence that, in turn, generated the crippling 'inability to mourn' that Frankfurt School psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich analyzed in their book with the same title. The German people after the war had become hardened to a point where they were unable to mourn not only the loss of the six million lives in the camps they had caused. They were equally unable properly to mourn and acknowledge their own losses. How after all can one mourn the loss of a few lives in one's own family if your people were guilty of trying to exterminate a whole other people? I am not saying that there was literally no mourning of the dead. But the very process of mourning was thwarted and distorted if not pre-empted altogether by guilt and shame and an irrevocable sense that as a German you deserved all your losses and more, or indeed were complicit in them. This is a psychic condition that can render one virtually insane with impossible mourning. The conflicted feelings were too intolerable to be processed in the open, let alone publicly. But since one couldn't make them disappear either, they were repressed, split off, and pushed into the cultural unconscious.

The crippling sense of inferiority that smoldered beneath the heat of reconstruction deeply affected the relationship of the war generation parents to their own children. 'The worst thing that can happen to parents is if the children take over,' my father used to say. Given the rigidly authoritarian style of my upbringing, I puzzled over his remark and once asked: 'What do you even mean by the children taking over?' 'Well, that they grow above their parents' heads,' he retorted in the familiar colloquial German phrase 'Die Kinder wachsen den Eltern ueber den Kopf.' That fear became a big issue when I wanted to enter Germany's system of higher education, the gymnasium. Unsuccessfully, my parents tried to dissuade me and, once I was in high school, the battle was often displaced onto language. My father would regularly fly into rages whenever I used a word he did not understand, particularly those new foreign words or terms kids began to use that were blamed for the 'Americanization' of the German language. 'Don't babble in that learned fashion!' he would shout at me with utter hostility, and I soon learned to watch my words around him just as I watched my steps. Speaking the father's code became my own personal prison house of

language and I rebelled by hardly speaking to him at all any more. Silencing thus worked at a collective and an individual level. Written language, too, including poetry and fiction, was considered a dangerous influence. Unable to deter me from reading, my mother tried to screen the books I brought home. I soon learned to give her the books I had already finished, often at night with a flashlight under the blanket. Worst of all were the American comic books. They were treated like poison. To describe them, parents and teachers used the same term they used to describe Nazi propaganda, *Volksverdummung*, a ‘stupidification’ of the people. I recall a secret reading of a *Mickey Mouse* comic in the forest after which I tried to determine whether I had really become more stupid and how it could possibly happen. It became nearly a philosophical problem to explore whether language could become a poisonous substance.

Such prohibition placed on language reaches deep, affecting the very core of the self. Used to thinking of myself as ‘the girl without words,’ it still haunts me to this day. Now I feel the effects in displaced forms, the most insidious being the guilt and fear associated with claiming a voice as the descendant of a perpetrator nation. The more distant a topic from my own history and concerns, the easier it becomes to speak. No wonder that I eagerly began to learn foreign languages—starting with French and English, the languages of the occupying forces. No wonder, either, that I ended up as a teacher of foreign literatures and specialized in that most abstract and distancing mode of discourse called critical theory. And if I now for the first time address the legacy of children of perpetrators in a public forum, I do so with some anxiety and unease. While I believe I can and should no longer avoid this confrontation, I still struggle over the issue of claiming a voice. Many years ago, I was invited to lecture at Tel Aviv University. During a lunch with a group of women colleagues, a debate ensued over the recent wave of memoirs of children of Holocaust survivors. One of my friends argued that these writers belittled their parents’ unfathomable suffering by exhibiting their own. The descendants of Holocaust survivors should accept an ethical obligation to remain silent, she felt. Others held against her that one cannot silence a whole generation and that no one should be deprived of a voice. I sat there, silently, trying to imagine what they would feel about a German claiming a voice in order to talk about the traumatic legacy of children of perpetrators. After returning to the US, I put my thoughts on ice for another ten years.

In the meantime, however, psychoanalytic research on the transgenerational transmission of trauma reawakened my concerns. As the only theory able to trace the effects of unconscious experience, psychoanalysis is invaluable in any attempt to face the ghosts of a past one has never lived, or lived only via the detours of its narrative and psychic transmission across generations. Traumatic historical legacies may be transmitted individually via unconscious fantasies of parents and grandparents as well as collectively through the cultural unconscious. Psychoanalysts have theorized such transmission as a form of psychic haunting, arguing that both children of victims and children of perpetrators of trauma unwittingly live the ghostly legacies and secrets of their parents and parental generation. After outlining the basic assumptions of a transgenerational trauma theory, I would therefore like to end with two concrete instances from

my personal experience that illustrate such a transmission of trauma across generations.

The debate about whether trauma can be handed down to the next generation who have not experienced the concrete traumatic event dates back to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's theory of transgenerational haunting, published in the 1970s and 1980s. In *The Shell and the Kernel*, Abraham and Torok develop their concept of the crypt, that is, a psychic space fashioned to wall-in unbearable experiences, memories or secrets. Abraham talks about the 'phantom effects' that haunt the children of parents who have lived through a traumatic history. Assuming that individuals can inherit the secret psychic substance of their ancestors' lives,⁴ Abraham argues that a person can manifest symptoms that do not directly spring from her own life experiences but from a parent's or ancestor's psychic conflicts, traumas, or secrets.⁵ Speaking of a *phantom*, a *haunting* or a *phantasmatic haunting*, Abraham uses a rhetoric of ghosts to suggest a foreign presence in the self. He in fact suggests, as his editor Rand states, 'the existence within an individual of a collective psychology comprised of several generations.'⁶ As we know from ghost stories and folklore, only the dead who were denied the rite of burial, who died an unnatural death, who committed or were the victim of a crime, or who suffered an unbearable injustice, come back to haunt the living. Such haunting is, in other words, the effect of unresolved trauma. A good example to illustrate this dynamic is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* where the ghost of her murdered child comes back to haunt her and her family until they work through the trauma of the past. *Beloved* also demonstrates the interweaving of personal and collective trauma. While the story focuses on the familial drama and the personal trauma of those involved in Sethe's killing of her baby, Sethe's act is caused by and cannot be understood without the traumatic history of slavery. In violent histories, the personal is inseparable from the collective and the political. While Abraham's emphasis remains largely within a familial framework and the legacies of family histories as they are passed down from generation to generation, the theoretical framework is well suited to include larger communities and peoples with collective traumatic histories. Abraham's concept of the phantom is particularly relevant for an analysis of the transmission of historical trauma through the cultural unconscious. Again, *Beloved* may serve as an example. Toni Morrison uses the figure of a ghost to trace effects of a collective trauma that the protagonists enact unconsciously. It is not only Sethe's personal history as a slave that triggers the killing of her baby daughter; it is also the history of her own mother who was never allowed to keep any of her own children. Sethe's mother passed down to her the sense that it is better to be dead than to be a slave, and better as a slave not even to attach yourself to your children the way a free mother would. Finally, *Beloved* demonstrates that trauma cannot be healed individually but needs communal support and a joint effort to face the ghosts of the past. In order to deal with collective historical trauma, we therefore need a theoretical framework with a transindividual perspective. Abraham and Torok's concept of the phantom and of transgenerational haunting not only moves psychoanalysis beyond individual life experiences and their intrapsychic processing, it also deals with the cultural legacies or the unfinished

business of one or more generations of a people and their transmission to the descendants.

Most cultures share a tendency to silence traumatic histories. Traumatic amnesia seems to become inscribed as cultural practice. Yet, trauma can never be completely silenced since its effects continue to operate unconsciously. Suggesting that the silence intended to cover up a traumatic event or history only leads to its unconscious transmission, Abraham speaks of a haunting that spans generations. He calls for a kind of psychoanalytic 'cult of ancestors' (as defined by Rand)⁷ that allows the dead to rest and the living to gain freedom from their ghostly hauntings. Yet, to achieve this freeing from the past requires one first to awaken the dead and to revisit the trauma. This process in fact is what we commonly call mourning. To facilitate a collective mourning, communities and nations develop the need to establish a culture of memory. Recognizing the psychic life of our ancestors in our own psychic life means uncovering their unspoken suffering and secret histories, as well as their guilt and shame, their crimes. Hence the importance of a family's, a community's or a nation's 'secret' histories. Secrecy in this context does not necessarily mean that there is no conscious knowledge of the past at all. It may also mean that this knowledge is silenced and removed from public life. In this case it becomes a tacit knowledge, shared by everyone yet treated like a taboo subject. People who bring it to the surface are often treated with passionate hostility as if they threatened a fragile sense of balance. The violent and traumatic events have to remain isolated and split off and in this sense they go unacknowledged even if there are isolated public commemorations or trials of war criminals. Psychoanalysis is, of course, a practice based on an ethics of contained uncovering. It works with the assumption that violent or traumatic events that are repressed or denied will continue to come back in haunting ways until there is a proper working through. The latter requires both taking responsibility for one's actions and mourning of losses. In uncovering traumatic histories, psychoanalysis at times resembles a paradoxical 'unburial,' that is, a digging into a community's or a nation's deadly secrets, or into the secret life of a dead person that has never been properly buried.

Only a process of breaking traumatic silence and revealing a buried secret can help to exorcise its ghostly alien presence from the inner world. Such a process entails that one takes responsibility for one's actions, works through guilt and shame, and mourns unbearable loss. It also requires that one face the effects of unspeakable violence. This dynamic operates at both a personal and a larger communal or cultural level. It also operates across generations. Of course, the dynamic changes if the acts of perpetration are not your own but belong to the generation of your parents. This makes facing one's historical legacy both easier and more difficult. Easier because the guilt is not a personal guilt, and more difficult because you need to face a legacy that has been passed down in complicated, subliminal and to a large extent entirely unconscious ways. Facing historical facts reveals only the tip of an iceberg. Facing the psychic effects of the legacy of violence, guilt, shame and (impossible) mourning as it has been passed down to the next generation is an excruciatingly complicated process. In the case of Germany, integration of historical trauma means stirring up the past in order to help the postwar generation work through the ghostly legacies of their

parents. Such an archeology of the psyche is indispensable for allowing the children of perpetrators to address the unfinished business of their parents. Only then can they gain the agency to deal with the past in their own terms. Without such agency they are bound to remain unconsciously fixated to their parents' traumatic deformation. More often than not this will lead them to try to avoid the issue altogether, thus becoming complicit in the silencing of trauma—even if it is only in feeling guilty about claiming a voice. The exhumation of the ghosts of the past is, in other words, also indispensable for trying to avoid the repetition of traumatic history or its displacement onto other people.

Finding a voice—whether it is speaking up, writing a narrative, a poem or a memoir, or simply telling one's story to another—is crucial in this culture of memory and testimony. Language is the first tool and mode of introjection. Abraham and Torok point out that even the starving infant is less helpless once it finds a way to voice the feeling of hunger, or once 'the empty mouth can be filled with words.'⁸ But how can one find a language for something that is unconscious? How can one tell the story of a history of which one is a protagonist without ever having experienced it directly? Often the story tells itself over and over in fantasies, in the language of the body in pain or distortion, or in the endless compulsive repetition of a particular traumatic rupture. One instance of such an unconscious fantasy has left a deep impression on me.

Margarethe von Trotta, the German filmmaker and director had done a series of films about sisters, among them *Sisters or the Balance of Happiness* (1979) and *Die Bleierne Zeit (Marianne and Juliane)* (1981), a film that was modeled on the life of RAF member Gudrun Enslin and her sister. In a television interview she was asked about her obsession with the topic of sisters, given the fact that she grew up without a sister. In her answer she declared that she never knew why, but that ever since she was a small child all her fantasies kept circling around sisters. Some time later an unknown woman contacted her and identified herself as her twin sister. She revealed that their parents had given up one of the twins and kept Margarethe who was never supposed to know. Unconsciously, however, Margarethe had found a way to enact a family secret that was never revealed to her.

In other instances where a trauma is enacted somatically, the story of the body remains hostage of the buried secret, haunted by an unknown phantom history or presence. A different language is needed to trace the 'phantom effect' of a memory without memory, to eliminate the presence of the phantom from the inner world, its encryption inside the self. In 'Notes on the Phantom,' Abraham speaks of this language in terms of a 'staging of words' that speak traumatic experience.

Extending the idea of the phantom, it is reasonable to maintain that the 'phantom effect' progressively fades during its transmission from one generation to the next and that, finally, it disappears. Yet, this is not at all the case when shared or complementary phantoms find a way of being established as social practices along the lines of *staged words* We must not lose sight of the fact that to stage a word—whether metaphorically, as an alloeme, or as a cryptonym—constitutes an attempt at exorcism, an attempt, that is, to relieve the unconscious by placing the effects of the phantom in the social realm.⁹

This would explain why any ethics that tries to silence personal trauma or traumatic history is doomed to fail. Exploring the possibilities, limitations and traps of reparation and redress as they are reflected in trauma discourses and, differently, in literature, also entails engaging the silences and phantom effects of traumatic histories. Claiming a voice then becomes part of a larger staging of words to relieve the phantom effects of trauma. Yet, it is not as if the act of claiming a voice does not have its own pitfalls and dangers. The 'staging of words,' while it may contribute to socio-psychic health, is not yet a solution in itself and may, in the worst case, obscure real political processing. Traumatic narratives can become charged melancholic objects that sustain the tie to old traumatic injuries while deflecting from the urgency of addressing new violent histories in the present. This is why it becomes increasingly important to address violent and traumatic histories across national, ethnic and cultural boundaries and across the divide of victims and perpetrators. Perhaps because I have experienced the guilt of claiming a voice, I have come to believe that both the descendants of victims and the descendants of perpetrators need to break the silence. They also need to escape their mutual isolation and begin talking about their different traumatic histories together, thus creating a dialogue that may help to trace what Abraham calls 'shared or complementary phantoms.' This dynamic is also related to what Ashis Nandy calls 'isomorphic oppression,' that is an oppression that is transferred from one group of victims to another, including the victimization of the oppressors' own kin.

We have arrived at a place in history where we can no longer afford to deal with the histories of victims and perpetrators in isolation. The damages and cultural deformations of these violent histories of colonialism, imperialism, war, genocide and slavery manifest themselves on both sides of the divide, and only if both sides work through the legacies of these histories can the vicious cycle of repetition be disrupted. Recent postcolonial theories as well as critical race theories have argued in a similar vein.

In his pathbreaking study on the psychology of colonialism, Ashis Nandy points out that, while the broad psychological contours of colonialism are now known, the concomitant cultural and psychological pathologies produced by colonization in the colonizing societies are less well known.¹⁰ This is true despite the fact that a theoretical framework to understand this psychosocial dynamic has been available at least since Hegel's analysis of the master-slave dialectic. 'Colonialism as a psychological process cannot but endorse the principle of isomorphic oppression,'¹¹ argues Nandy. This dynamic also underlies, I believe, the psychological deformations of perpetrator cultures more generally. One of the most common deformations is the internalization and hence internal repetition of patterns of violence in the perpetrator culture. Nandy uses Fanon's example of the police officer who tortured the Algerian freedom fighters and then became violent toward his own wife and children, to illustrate the dynamic of isomorphic oppression. We have similar evidence of veterans returning from US wars and invasions, only to turn violent against their own people and kin. In postwar Germany, there is ample evidence that many German parents transferred the patterns of violence internalized during the Nazi era onto their own children, following a desperate, often unconscious, urge to eradicate any

trace of ‘otherness’ in them. One of the most invisible and socially unacknowledged effects of war trauma consists precisely in isomorphic oppression. The latter becomes all the more pervasive if there is a silencing or denial of the history of violence and a concomitant displacement of its effects onto the cultural unconscious. If violent histories are treated like open national secrets, they are bound to be re-enacted. In her book about the German postwar generation, *What Did You Do In the War, Daddy?* Sabine Reichel writes:

The truth is, that Germans have remained tortured too—as they should as oppressors—because what they’ve committed is an irrevocably guilty act. They haven’t survived the cold-blooded annihilation of other people without substantial psychological damage—but they are not aware of it. With every single extinguished life, something in the murderers died with the murdered in the trenches, gas chambers and ovens.¹²

To account for this psychological deformation of perpetrators and their children, it is necessary to expand Abraham and Torok’s notion of the ‘crypt’ to include cultural or national crypts. Abraham and Torok define encryptment as a psychic response to trauma in which an intolerable experience becomes walled in, silenced and removed from consciousness and the public sphere. Such intolerable experiences can occur on the side of victims who cannot face unbearable loss, humiliation, destruction, torture or genocide. They can also occur on the side of perpetrators who cannot face their own violence, guilt or shame. Just like intrapsychic crypts, cultural and national crypts harbor the repressed or denied memories of violence. Once the latter are walled off from a conscious politics of remembrance and public debate, they can no longer be worked through and transformed into a politics of redress. Collectively established crypts become the sources of a cultural and national haunting that cannot be addressed unless the crypt is opened and the silence broken.

Perhaps it is important to stress here that silence need not be complete in order for this dynamic to operate. There may even be—as there was in Germany after the war—an open politics of acknowledgment of war crimes, including the Nuremberg trials and the process of ‘de-Nazification’ as well as the monumentalization of victimage and official politics of reparation. But unless these acts include a psychosocial politics that addresses the responsibility, complicity, guilt, shame and psychosocial deformation of the culture at large, it in fact only helps to perpetuate a politics of silencing and denial. In the worst case, historical monumentalization may even aggravate such politics by providing a safely contained outlet to alleviate unconscious feelings of guilt and shame.

I would like to end my thoughts on transgenerational haunting with two concrete examples, one intrapsychic and one cultural, both drawn from my own experience of growing up in postwar Germany. I have thought for a long time about the status of personal experiences and narratives in the attempt to work through the legacies of traumatic histories. Two of my friends to whom I gave this essay cautioned me against including these examples, arguing that they are too personal to be exemplary. I am not sure this is true. I will tell the story of my ‘phantom brother,’ that is, the story of my own history as a child who was supposed to replace the brother who had died in the war. While this is a highly

personal narrative, we know from the psychoanalytic literature on ‘replacement children’ that the psychic dynamic I am describing is much more widespread than we commonly believe. Parents who lose a child to a violent history are especially vulnerable to turning their next child into a ‘replacement child.’ I think that the story is relevant as a concrete example of the transgenerational transmission of a war trauma. In a sense, the stories about my dead brother have become the core of my own visceral experience of what a war means in terms of human loss. I know there are many postwar replacement children with similar stories and I have met some of them. My second story concerns my hometown and the ghostly erasure, after the war, of the history of its Jewish citizens. This too can barely be considered a merely personal experience. I rather think that my discovery of the book about Tiengen’s Jews illustrates how pervasive and intricate the silencing of the Holocaust was after the war. Finally, I believe that only by tracing the personal effects of historical violence can we begin to face a responsibility that does not end with the generation of perpetrators.

I. The phantom brother

I was born after the end of the war as the second child of my parents. Their first child, a son named Paul-Juergen, born during the war, died when he was only a few months old from the effects of acute smoke poisoning. During an air raid on Freiburg that had completely destroyed our family’s house, my mother ran with her infant son through the burning city to take refuge in a bomb shelter. The dense smoke poisoned and eventually destroyed his lungs. On their way, they crossed the neighboring playground. A bomb had landed right in the middle, killing the children, tearing their little bodies apart, leaving limbs in the trees and the severed head of a little boy. My mother kept telling the same story over and over from the earliest time I can remember when I was only 3 years old. She kept a stern face, reproachful in fact, and the story, told in a flat, monotone voice, seemed to carry a secret message, a threat of sorts. I was always listening, mortified, never asking a question. The image of my mother walking with my baby brother through a playground with torn-up children stayed with me through all my life. I carry it inside like a ghostly presence. Sometimes I think that my mother went insane that day. She was never able to cope with the trauma of war, the loss of her first baby, her brother and her home.

Already my brother’s birth, only a few months earlier, had been highly traumatic. My mother had gone into labor during a previous air raid. The nurses had to rush her into the hospital cellar from where she could hear the bombs hitting right and left while she tried to push her baby out. She nearly died after contracting *Kindbettfieber*. For two months in intensive care, she hallucinated from a fever that would not break. Her doctor saved her with injections of a germ-killing mix of champagne and lemons that my father had to get on the black market. So my mother did survive, yet only to have her infant son killed a few months later. And even he was already the second casualty in the family after her brother had died on the battlefield during the first days of the war. With their house in ruins, my parents moved with my grandmother to the little border

town near Switzerland where I grew up—‘to start a new life’ as they used to say, already succumbing to the collectively spreading manic defense.

I was already far into my adult life when I finally figured out that my mother had a form of insanity, a psychotic incapacity to distinguish between reality and fantasy. As a small child, I took her erratic behavior, her unpredictable mood swings, her rages, as they came, helpless at first and then defiant. As far back as I can remember, she would call me a changeling, asserting that there was no way I could be her child. ‘They must have exchanged you in the hospital,’ she said, ‘you are the wrong child.’ Sometimes she tried to convince my father I was possessed by the devil. ‘I can see the devil in her eyes,’ she used to scream. To survive psychically, I quite early seemed to have appropriated her narrative of not being her child. My mother read me an entry in her diary from the time I was 2 years old in which I allegedly told her: ‘If you are so mean to me, I’m no longer your child, I’ll be the child of the man who owns the sun.’

It took decades and several years of psychoanalysis finally to understand why I could never be the right child. I was supposed to replace her dead firstborn son, and she kept us both locked into a merciless battle over the impossibility of my ever being able to fulfill this task. I was the wrong child, the wrong gender, the wrong temperament and, above all else, I didn’t bring him back, I didn’t make those memories go away. He was still right inside her, encrypted, a living ghost, and, while I was supposed to be him, to replace him, to exorcise him, I always failed. From then on, there was nothing I ever could do right for her. It was not only that I failed to meet her unconscious need; she also displaced her guilt onto me. Ultimately, she took revenge on me for having lost him because I did not bring him back. In this way she enacted an unconscious guilt of being complicit in his death. This sense of mine was supported after my mother’s death in a conversation with my younger brother who told me our mother had relayed to him that she initially didn’t want to marry my father because she never wanted to risk having a baby during the war. After their son died she would always harbor a secret blame toward my father and herself for not following through with this precaution.

These processes were, of course, unconscious, a legacy I was born with that even my mother didn’t understand. She just acted on it. I was supposed to replace a murdered brother whom my mother couldn’t mourn properly. After all, the war was Germany’s fault and she was weighed down by an unfathomable guilt she could not acknowledge. This sense is encapsulated in a screen memory that belongs to my mother’s war stories. When my parents picked up my brother’s body in a tiny coffin, my mother broke down in the hospital, only to have the doctor admonish her sharply to pull herself together. ‘Think of the soldiers who gave their lives to this war,’ he said, ‘your child didn’t even have a life yet.’ Denied the right to mourn her infant son whose life was too short to count, how could this loss not have driven her insane? I recently found a poem of mine in which I wrote ‘I carried the corpse of my brother in my womb like an identical twin.’ When I was born, my mother placed her grief into me. I became the container of her crypt, carrying my dead brother like a living dead, taking over my mother’s incapacity to mourn him, to let go of him. All my life I sensed, without knowing it, the weight of this legacy. It is a form of survivor’s

guilt albeit different from the one experienced by Holocaust survivors. It is the guilt of owing one's life to the death of a sibling. How could I claim a right to live while in my mother's fantasy I was supposed to be my dead brother and in my own fantasy he was dead inside me?

The story of my phantom brother took another turn when I was 9 years old. My mother was pregnant with my second brother. A gypsy woman had predicted that she would give birth to a healthy son on a Sunday. 'A Sunday child,' she called him, a sign of luck. But my mother was taken over by another certitude, namely that she would die in childbirth. She took me aside one day to talk to me. What she would tell me would have to remain secret forever, she said. Then she revealed to me that she would die giving birth to my new brother, and requested that I take her place. 'Promise you take care of your sisters and your brother. Make sure your father never marries another woman or sends your grandmother away.' Mortified, I would just repeat: 'I don't want you to die!' She insisted I needed to take care of the family in her place. Unable to carry the weight of this responsibility, I finally broke down and talked to our local priest during confession. He simply said: 'Put your worries to rest, I'll talk to God and tell him to spare your mother.'

Again, it took decades to understand what happened at the time. My mother was pregnant with yet another child that was supposed to replace the dead brother. Since the gypsy had revealed to her that it was to be a son, she simply condensed the two children. After all, she nearly died in giving birth to her first son and was never supposed to have survived him. So this time she thought it would happen as it was meant to be: she would be the one who died first, giving birth to him and releasing him to live. One may confidently assume that this fantasy was partly designed to alleviate her survivor's guilt. How then was my mother's trauma transmitted to me? Neither of us knew what was happening, but it seems clear to me that she wanted me to take care of the legacy of a brother who was killed in the war, a son who could not be mourned. First she wanted me to replace him, and after I failed in doing so, she wanted me to replace her and take care of him. This game of psychic substitution and displacement follows a sacrificial logic of sorts. There was a tacit request from my mother that I sacrifice my own self or being to become the placeholder of and act as another, first the dead brother and then the soon to be dead mother. How do you love a brother that hovers inside you as a ghost? How do you kill the ghost of a dead brother in order to live, all the while holding on to the love for the baby boy you see on family photos, knowing he had been your brother? How do you live the love for an imaginary older brother who would protect you, having never known him because he had already been killed before you were born? And how do you love a mother who hates you for not being the dead brother and who loves you so much she wants you to take her place?

II. The phantom town

In 1983, I accepted an invitation for a one-year Visiting Professorship at the University of California-Irvine. I never returned to live in Germany and, in 1986, officially became an 'alien resident' in the US, a designation that fitted like a

glove to my inner status of feeling alien anywhere in the world, even as a child in my hometown, Tiengen. In 1987, I went back to visit my parents in this town. Browsing in a local bookstore, I came across a book by Dieter Petri entitled *Die Tiengener Juden*. I stared at the book in disbelief. Tiengen's Jews? I hadn't known there had been Jews living in Tiengen, in fact, I had never thought about it. I bought the book and finished it, transfixed, in one reading during the night. It felt like unearthing a hidden city under the one I had known as a child. Why had it never occurred to me to ask whether there had been any Jews in Tiengen and what happened to them during the war? Now I recalled that I used to walk through the *Judengasse*, the *Jew's Alley*, on my way to church. For me it was just a name, and it never even occurred to me that it was named after the Jews who lived there before the war. So it came that only decades after leaving the city I discovered its shameful history in a book written by an author who had, as a child about my age, lived just across the street, above an old restaurant, *Blume*. In Petri's book, I found out that this very restaurant used to be a Jewish restaurant before the war. There was another restaurant, *Ochsen*, which Petri identifies as the place most frequented by the Jewish citizens. It was right across the street from my parents' first jewelry store and we used to eat there on Sundays when I was little.

Suddenly, while reading *Die Tiengener Juden*, a fear welled up and took hold of me. The silence had worked after all, had crept into me and blinded me to what I could have seen if I had been more alert. I must have internalized the Germans' denial and silence after the war, despite the fact that, even when I was a child, I had tried to promise to myself that I never wanted to close my eyes before anything, however horrible. My town's erasure of history had caught up with me despite the fact that, as soon as I learned about the genocide of Jews and the concentration camps, I was shocked into defiance and suspicion against my country, my parents and teachers, and the people of my childhood town. And yet, I had never given a thought about what happened to the Jews, simply assuming the town had always been as it was when I grew up.

The next day I walked through the town, first through the *Hauptstrasse* and then the familiar old alleys, my favorite solitary places. There was the bakery, *Steffen*, where I used to buy bread and cake. Now I knew that it once was the house where Berthold Bernheim lived, one of the Jews who owned a dowry business in an old house in the *Zubergasse*. In the *Reichskristallnacht* the Nazis got Bernheim at his home, brought him to a district prison and finally transported him to the concentration camp in Dachau. He survived, returning as a witness of the killing of other Jews from Tiengen, including his brother-in-law. There were many other buildings owned by Jewish businessmen, mainly the Bernheim and Guggenheim families, in the *Hauptstrasse*. The store where we bought my shoes, for example, used to belong to Julius Guggenheim who was taken to the concentration camp in Dachau and murdered ten days later. Three years after I was born, his son Ernst was killed as an Israeli soldier.

I then went to the neighborhood next to my elementary school, the old *Volksschule*, where I lived until I was about 10 years old. Our backyard had bordered on the *Tugoweg*, a little alley in which I used to ride my tricycle. Our

neighbors across the street were the Albickers. From Petri's book I learned that they had rented out an apartment to Heimann Rabbincowicz before he bought a stately house of his own. He, too, was killed two weeks after being deported to Dachau. I now discovered that it was the Albickers, his former landlords, who took over his house after he was killed, and that I used to play in this house with their son Karl. There was an uneasy feeling about being drawn into complicity, without my having a chance to know about it, with a family that actively profited from the murder of their neighbor and former tenant in a concentration camp. It had a haunting quality because it gave me the sense that there was no way to ever escape being tainted by the Nazi violence that occurred before I was even born.

Finally, I went to the *Judengasse*, but to my amazement the street sign said *Turm-gasse*. After talking to a few people I found out that the alley had been renamed but everybody kept using the name *Judengasse*. There, I now knew, the Nazis had destroyed the Jewish synagogue and turned it into an apartment house. Around the corner from it, the most beautiful house in Tiengen, a corner house in an old alley with a huge ancient mural depicting a medieval battle between the Germans and the Swiss, had housed the Jewish women's bath. On my way to school, I used to walk by there along a wall made of beautiful stones that Petri identified as the gravestones of the old Jewish cemetery.

I was never able to see Tiengen with the same eyes any more and never will. It has become a haunted city and the erasure of all traces of Jewish life is now but a material manifestation of the German denial of the Shoah. There is a material denial of lived experience and effect even where people are willing to acknowledge the historical facts. Moreover, this denial of lived experience and affect makes it all the more easy to displace certain sentiments formerly harbored against the Jews onto new 'others' within. I remember the suspicion, resentment and rejection during the time I grew up, against the gypsies who returned to the town every summer, against the few communists among Tiengen's inhabitants, but also against the German refugees who came to resettle in Southern Germany because they had lost their homes. And later, during my teens, the first massive influx of foreign guest workers was met with a new surge of xenophobia and racism. Today some of Tiengen's houses wear commemorative plates that identify their Jewish history. But they speak without speaking, empty signs that point to the denial of history rather than its endurance. 'Time does not pass, it accumulates.' But here it accumulated a silence that becomes ever more deadly the longer it lasts. Petri's book was a first step toward breaking this silence, but I met only people of the postwar generation who had read it, while those who were complicit in its history tried to ignore it. It is in this very book that I found the inscription that I quoted at the beginning of my article: 'Remember, Jew, Tiengen was, is and remains German.' Meanwhile, this invocation has itself become the site of a ghostly haunting. Looking at the commemorative plates that encrypt the town's Jewish presence, however, is not seeing. Only those who dig deep into the archeology of this town's cultural unconscious can see what the plates tell without telling, the town's hidden history of genocide.

Notes

¹ Ursula Duba, *Tales from the Child of the Enemy*, New York: Penguin Books, 1995, pp 1–3.

² Sabine Reichel, *What Did You Do In the War, Daddy? Growing Up German*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1989, p 4.

³ *Juden sind in Tiengen nicht erwünscht.*
In Tiengen sieht man Fremde gern,
Doch der Jude bleibe fern.
Denn merk Dir Jude, was dich auch treibt
Daß Tiengen Deutsch war, ist und bleibt.

⁴ Nicholas T Rand, 'Introduction,' Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p 166.

⁵ Rand, 'Introduction.'

⁶ Part V, 'Secrets and Posterity: The Theory of the Transgenerational Phantom,' Editor's note, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis, Volume 1*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p 166.

⁷ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p 167.

⁸ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p 114.

⁹ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p 176.

¹⁰ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, p 30.

¹¹ Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, p 31.

¹² Reichel, *What Did You Do In the War, Daddy?*, p 190f.