

## TIME MAY CHANGE US: THE STRANGE TEMPORALITIES, NOVEL PARADOXES, AND DEMOCRATIC IMAGINARIES OF A PANDEMIC

*Time may change me  
But you can't trace time  
Strange fascinations fascinate me*

...  
*Turn and face the strange*  
—DAVID BOWIE, *Changes*

*The psychic atmosphere of everyday life is that of disturbing strangeness. . . .  
The most familiar places become foreign places.*  
—BERNARD CHERVET

*It's not a question of vocabulary, it's a question of time.*  
—DR. RIEUX IN CAMUS'S *The Plague*

**T**he core function of psychoanalysis is to confront the rips, gaps, and aporias in our experiences and discourses. We aim to turn confusion into a space for discovery; we aim to reckon with genuine alterity; we aim to question the known knowns. It is a process defined by its dismantling of received knowledge and customary experience, by its disruption of normalized circuits of expectancies and repetitions' compulsions, by its aims to reveal unpalatable, certainly conflicted, truths and desires. As soon as we incline to arrest change by imposing certainty—to

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turn back time, to indulge in nostalgia and familiarity, to live in a bygone world—we are shirking our duty to *face the strange*.

From this vantage point, one might say that in recent years previously “unthinkable” political realities have functioned as an initiation for ordinary citizens and public thinkers alike into a certain kind of psychoanalytic process. Well before the novel coronavirus emerged, the sweep of events had already unmoored us, blown us off familiar courses, revealing disavowed truths and devastating realities, cordoned off from what a more privileged (and white) public cared to get its mind around. What had once been unfathomable pierced our bubbles, implicating “us” as well as “them.” School shootings did not just happen “there” (i.e., in black and brown communities) but in seemingly secure white suburban havens. Nor were they performed by “them” (invariably, it seemed the perpetrators were white, self-identified as Christian, and to some degree fancied themselves as ethno-nationalists).

Climate catastrophes, once scattered in space and time, became more frequent and momentous, affecting communities of color the most but not sparing privileged playgrounds. Cellphone videos and body cameras dispelled our blissful ignorance of racialized police brutality. It became harder for those of us raised in relative comfort—encased in “blissful ignorance”—to ignore the increasingly well-documented hate crimes directed at racial, sexual, and religious minorities. Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, the Bernie Sanders campaign: these and other movements chipped away at our denial of inconvenient truths. Not only was democracy not working as we’d imagined; the planet’s health was in need of urgent care; and both might be fatally doomed. What we previously imagined to be firm ground now yielded like quicksand.

Meanwhile, the #MeToo movement furthered this social-psychoanalytic intervention by exposing what most women already knew (or so we thought), and what women of color have never been free to doubt: that sexual assault and violation are commonplace, and that our power structures continue to aid and abet the perpetrators. Prominent problematic men (virtually all of them white<sup>1</sup>) came tumbling down like a house of cards, yet others (e.g., Brett Kavanaugh) were spared by the same established privilege that had supported those now in disgrace. Nonetheless, cheeky signs of vulvas and the sobering litanies of formerly untold secrets

<sup>1</sup>But for the notable exception of Bill Cosby.

held by untold scores of women—celebrity women, marginalized women, women of color—left irretrievable traces on the public consciousness.

In short, for many of us, reliable psychic defenses against knowing too much, or too well, have grown increasingly feeble. Life is getting weirder, less coherent, more disturbing. The familiar, if stale and dull veneers on how we see and inhabit the world, have been eroding if not corroding for a while now. As events—and Tweets—have pointed toward the weird, our usual psychic stasis has been freshly in flux. We, especially those among us who shield ourselves in the cloak of white privilege, or for that matter white psychoanalysis, were ripe for time on the couch.

Yet, even in the shambles of our political, racial, sexual, and environmental upheavals, we began accommodating to the unsettling weird, retreating gradually and subtly to the familiar, to sameness, to the spell of unbrokenness. Before the arrival of Covid-19, many of us, psychoanalysts and citizens alike, had become well-versed in the constant revelations of unwanted realities: the polarizations in society, the rhetoric of us versus them, whiteness and everyone else, the heteronormative and the gender-queer, the one percent and the masses. Some, despite their privilege, admitted to exhaustion and exasperation owing to the double binds that left them feeling that no matter where they stood on whichever continuum, they were endlessly “othering” others and failing to recognize others’ otherness.

Perhaps the weird had encroached gradually enough that at least some were developing the resilience to face what is real, alarming, destabilizing, and also novel without becoming dysregulated. But for many, the growing weirdness in our everyday life already exceeded our limits. There’s been too much to document and too little capacity to absorb it. It’s been exhausting.

And so, fatigued by the excess, by the time the novel coronavirus entered the scene we were already acutely susceptible to world-weariness. What once was stupefying, and then astonishing, before becoming frankly weird, now barely warranted mention in the news or in our social media feeds, seeming only to be more of the same. The erratic behavior of our leaders seemed no longer truly strange, but rather predictable. Of course, life for the most vulnerable has always been a constant crisis. Now the rest of us were becoming inured to living on orange alert, which deep inside we know should be red.

We were using the too visible to mask the invisible. One excess tames another. When we, as analysts, collude in this taming, we evade a basic

ethical obligation: to turn and face the strange(r) and its, but also his/her/their, uncanny call. But the weird had been training us for a deeper (and properly psychoanalytic) dive: a break in the conventional ordering of knowledge, conditioning us to bear and possibly even acquire a taste for the uncertainty, precarity, and tumult of being alive. Such psychic conditioning opens us to the experience that pervades the lives of many marginalized subjects, just as it brings us to the threshold of undernarrativized archaic pasts and elemental futures.

In this context, the arrival of the Covid-19 catastrophe could not have been more timely.

True, when early reports first escaped from China, few of us paid much attention; but then they alarmingly (and closer to home for many of us) began to be heard from Italy. We learned of the deaths, of online mourning rituals, then of hospitals and healthcare workers in crisis, then of singing from balconies, then of metaphorical dolphins in Venice. It grew harder by the day to get our minds around what was happening, and to stave off what had not long ago been consigned to the order of nameless dread, unthinkable anxiety. Our Covid vocabulary grew as we discoursed about viruses, N95 and homemade masks, ventilators, CFRs, global supply chains, and plasma testing. But the most often repeated words, in pretty much every conversation I had during those first many weeks, in nearly every news analysis, and certainly in every psychoanalytic session I was conducting, were old and utterly *familiar*: “weird” and “strange.”<sup>2</sup> Such words applied to the virus first, but then to the disruptive effects on lifestyles, on fantasies and facts of Western privilege. Self-isolation and massive shutdowns fundamentally altered societies used to ungaurded contact. Vibrant streets turned into eerie, abandoned corridors.

The daily march of headlines underscored that even hyperprivileged Americans could not remain strangers to the strange. Negative oil prices; the cancellation of entire sporting and theatrical seasons; Trump’s musings (retconned as “sarcastic”) on the potential benefits of ingesting or injecting bleach; it went on—goes on—and on, relentlessly. In this context, the novel virus has become a signifier gone viral, with major psychic and also global effects.

<sup>2</sup>Before the world turned upside down, I’d already been charting signposts of the “weird” and the “strange” (Gentile 2019), as I was convinced that, in both the public realm and in the clinic, a new semiotics and phenomenology of unfamiliarity complicated our struggle to make sense of what was at once unprecedented and archaic (the return of a repressed pastness). This new signage, or my growing attention to it, emerged in sync with the rise of Trump and the vote for Brexit.

We might then say that the coronavirus has functioned, on a remarkable scale, as does psychoanalysis: breaking apart ideological enclosures and curbing our inclination toward repetition.<sup>3</sup> At least we have learned that our startle response is alive and well. What is “other and otherwise” to consciousness (Barratt 2019, p. 56) has awakened us. Who among us, who has the privilege for any modicum of self-reflection, is not taking inventory of their lives—asking what needs to be shed, and what might, just might, be possible to change? Or at very least discovering that some things—freshly experienced as utterly unacceptable—absolutely can’t remain the same? It would seem that, despite its physical toll, the limitations it imposes, and, most obviously and ominously, its death-dealing impact, the coronavirus too has served emancipatory and thus psychoanalytic ends, by prompting novel paradoxical tensions and daringly fresh imaginaries.

I explore these novel paradoxes and new imaginaries below. But it’s necessary first to introduce the further insistence of the Real. Another new, but not entirely novel, actor/plot-twist—invader—had jolted us awake to a disowned known and its torrent of affective charges. Just as we were finding some new balance between the weird/strange and our retreat to sameness from the toll of its excesses, we, differently no doubt according to race and privilege, but nonetheless collectively, were shaken by Derek Chauvin’s nonchalant murder of George Floyd, which followed closely upon the killings of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, which on their own had barely registered in the prevailing (i.e., white) public consciousness. Nonetheless, they precipitated an *après-coup* encounter with our ancestral racialized legacies, including hegemonic white privilege, and gross structural inequities. Psychoanalysis has not been exempt: its complicity calls into question its validity as an emancipatory, healing praxis.

## NOVEL PARADOXES

Let’s first remember that. . .

The strange novel virus and its flurry of signifiers initially narrowed most people’s attention to self-interest, giving rise to panic buying and

<sup>3</sup>It’s worth noting that many of us dared temporarily to nurse the fantasy that the coronavirus would join us—all humanity, an entire planet—against a common “invisible enemy” (Trump’s favorite characterization of Covid-19). The fantasy, if still framed as a split between us and the virus, was not shared by Trump, who seems devoid of such collective imaginal capacity, remaining invested instead in fomenting divisive, stark oppositions: haves and have-nots, winners and losers.

efforts at self-protection. But its effects, both as an instance of the Real and as a metaphor, soon compelled us to refocus outward. And what we found there was a series of weird, if not quite strange, contradictions, irreducible to facile splitting and polarization.

For example, our preoccupation with our own respiratory health has broadened into an unprecedented if mostly unintended mobilization toward climate action. Regardless of motive, our refraining from polluting behaviors has resulted in the bluest skies many of us have seen in years, if not in our lifetimes. And yet we enjoy the fresh, resurrecting air mainly through the pores of isolating masks. We gaze at new and more brilliant stars across a suddenly wider galaxy, but primarily from our confinement in the most familiar of settings. Service industry jobs we used to consider pedestrian if not insignificant are newly revealed as “essential”: the ordinary have been elevated to the extraordinary, if also implicitly “sacrificial” (Gidla 2020). Meanwhile, we’ve had to reestimate the value of our own now “inessential” profession. Conventional identities have, however transiently, been upended by a novel entity. Meanwhile, the coronavirus has made us walking dangers to one another. To engage with others is to be simultaneously vulnerable and threatening; it may be some time before we dare to meet unmasked.<sup>4</sup> Our physical apartness is at once our greatest ally in mutual survival, and an impediment to those who feel ethically compelled, for the sake of mutual survival, to protest *en masse*. If “social distancing” (a psychoanalytically loathsome term<sup>5</sup>) is our main defense against the virus’s sheer, borderless virality, intersectional bodies on the ground are also key in the collective fight against virulent racism and its structural inequities.

Our need for each other (and for all others), so often cloaked, has been fully exposed, precisely because of the spatial remove instigated by the novel virus. Perhaps this gap stimulates our deepest fleshly desires, galvanizing collective action. Our greatest twinned fears, aloneness and longing, lie in equal contradictory measure. And our longing for each other is newly discovered, newly “known” because viscerally bare, Real, if impalpable. This always/never known reverberates at a strange new frequency,

<sup>4</sup>Consider in this context, Achille Mbembe’s observation of the mask as “the ultimate symbol of the determination of the living to defend themselves against death” (2017, p. 181).

<sup>5</sup>My Thursday consultation group has suggested calling it “consciously aware interdependence.”

detuned by disruptive waves of timelessness. Past and futures impinge in new ways upon our present, and there's no decontextualizing the individual from the social, and no telling what path the arrow of time will take.

The coronavirus insists upon a further paradox, one seemingly anathema to psychoanalysis. We need to embrace precisely what Freud resignedly recognized as a congenital fault: the *herd mentality*. If we consciously, *choicefully* cultivate it (i.e., by donning masks and social distancing), we may both slow transmission rates and ever so gradually cultivate *herd immunity*. And, possibly compounding the paradoxes, it may be that it is our cultivation of psychological antibodies, more than actual biological antibodies (the durability of which have been questioned by recent studies<sup>6</sup>), that is the priority. As we begin to fear others' presence less, we will begin to trust that we might and can survive each other (and vice versa). Such antibodies will be essential to empowering collective political resistance.

Might the demands posed by the virus have conditioned our collective spirit, as expressed outwardly in global protests? Might that, in turn, immunize us against the forces of white ethno-nationalism, from their lies, callousness, impunities, arrogance, and cowardice? Might then our shared antibodies help us maintain the strength to reclaim what psychoanalysis espouses: truth, accountability, courage, love, and difference? If so, when we rejoin one another, it will be a novel encounter paradoxically grounded in a repressed past. And if so, we will need our collective immunity to be stronger than our herd mentality. Only then might we contend with the disjointed, with the gaps, with what exceeds sameness, with what—and who—remains radically, and systemically, excluded.

Yes, this is a tall order, whose fulfillment recent experience has given us some reason to doubt. But we must reckon with our dependence on each other—our commonality—if we are to reckon with what transcends and thereby grounds us: the Real.

<sup>6</sup>Recent revelations suggest that the human body doesn't seem to retain antibodies over time, hence jeopardizing possibilities for an effective vaccine. On July 17, the *San Francisco Chronicle* published an article (Fimrite 2020) titled "Studies Show Coronavirus Antibodies May Fade Fast, Raising Questions about Vaccines." More optimistically, emergent evidence suggests that t cell response, rather than antibodies, provides the stronger and longer-lasting immunity. See, in *The Atlantic*, the article "How Long Does COVID-19 Immunity Last?" (Thompson 2020).

## STRANGE TEMPORALITIES

*The pace I'm goin' through  
Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes*

—DAVID BOWIE

The psychoanalyst Philippe Gendrault (who posted an exquisitely thoughtful response to a question from several colleagues about what psychoanalysis might be in the time of plague<sup>7</sup>), observes that “we are living, both analysts and analysands, in this historical *Real* time, and therefore traumatic. Accordingly, *It* disrupts the usual order of things.” By dint of entering *Real* time, we analysts “are no longer those special individuals who have access to a certain knowledge with its own *weltanschauung*. The virus has reduced us to the mere status of citizens, like all the other people facing this pandemic.”

Gendrault, not despite but because of this verdict, argues further that

The limitation to interpretation placed upon the psychoanalytic act by the social . . . opens up the analyst as citizen's political voice, a voice no longer constrained by his or her psychoanalytic *weltanschauung*. . . . We are way past any psychoanalytic *weltanschauung*. . . . This crisis has forced us elsewhere, namely, in the *Real* time of collective history. . . . With this crisis, as is the case with climate change, addressing the emergence of the *Real*, when it happens, will no longer suffice. From now on, we will have to deal with the *emergency of the Real* [emphasis added].

Reading this both exhilarated me and gave me pause. I agree with Gendrault that we have entered *Real* time (so to speak); but I disagree with his take on the stakes for psychoanalysis. Where Gendrault locates the end of psychoanalysis is to my mind where it “truly” begins. Recall Winnicott's startling, paradoxical insight that our *fear of breakdown* is a projection into the future of primitive agonies that occurred in the past, but which have yet to be experienced because the infant was not yet a subject capable of experiencing them. If that is true, it leads to a different interpretation, which fuels a different fantasy, an *Other* hypothesis.

<sup>7</sup>See “Letter to Analysts” (Gendrault 2020), in response to a letter by a group of analysts (Coelen, Gherovici, Lichtenstein, Malater, and Webster 2020). Gendrault's letter asked “the seemingly unaskable question to you, our fellow psychoanalysts—what does it mean to do psychoanalysis in a situation like this? . . . if we want people to question themselves so thoroughly, should we not also, especially in times as desperate as this, seriously do so ourselves?”

Precisely because analyst and analysand are joined “in Real time, in an emergency of the Real” (inspiring “the analyst’s function beyond the consulting room as political activist/citizen”), the analytic pair may now, at long last, encounter each other in a previously eluded, perpetually postponed, eruptive (dis)order of time.

And if that is true, then the coronavirus affords us an opportunity to experience a long-deferred breakdown that makes it possible in the now shared space to experience what has not yet been experienced. Noelle McAfee (2019), employing Winnicott’s insight for its relevance to political breakdown, calls attention to the here-and-now revitalizing possibilities that result from reactivating “an un-lived memory of an archaic past and its cataclysmic end” (p. 231). Thus, the entry into Real time is that of a temporally disordered present, accompanied by a further, previously unrealizable paradox: the subject of *Real Time*, possible only when two subjects are joined in Real time. This is the subject of Winnicott’s breakdown experience, experienced for a first-*Real*-time; Bollas’s unthought knowns, now also (if ever elusively and enigmatically) *Real* knowns, known thoughts (of the Real); Bion’s nameless dreads, newly nameable. A subject, again thinking with Bion and Winnicott, of caesura, of rebirth born of breakdown. A subject of truth.

The novel virus has interpellated us beyond the *merely weird*, into a descent marked with signage of the weird and strange. We plunge into the novel dis/order of time in which occurs the most transformative action of psychoanalysis. Here we find the possibility of a prior impossibility: a novel encounter between unconscious fantasy and an historical if dissociated (because traumatic) reality that takes on a more Real but also more present cast.<sup>8</sup> In hindsight, it seems that recent murders of black people by white men are, at least in great part, “transgenerational transmissions” (Apprey 2014) in which, as Frank Wilderson (2017) argues, “blackness is inextricably tied to ‘slaveness’” (ross 2020), and in turn links to an originary, if disavowed, genocide (of the American Indian) and loss of indigeneity. Blackness—or, per Wilderson, “anti-blackness”—marks a further

<sup>8</sup>If this is so, I think we need to take beyond mere analogy what geophysicists have long been alerting us to: that we are entering a strange new and *unpredictable* geological epoch. Or moreover, a new aeon, which has been termed “sapeizoic” (see Grinspoon 2016) to highlight that we are witnessing, even more than a new epoch, a major inflection point in the way the planet functions due to the advent of conscious (though not solely or necessarily human) agency as forces of planetary change.

structural reality, pointing to what remains unassimilable, unthought, incoherent, abject. Excess had to be eradicated and along with it the conflicted motions of the drives. This dis/ordered temporality is capable of dis/orienting us to each other—and to ourselves. Might we finally encounter the Strange(r)? One beyond the Same and its repression barrier? The unassimilable Other?

Here, in this altering space/time, we must *listen between* orders of the familiar and dis/orders of the strange. We must remain sentient to semiotic and sensual signaling from (seemingly) contradictory directions, emanating neither strictly from/to present time, nor from/to the past, nor from/toward the future, but from/to each. I would describe this “listening between” as a dimension of Chetrit-Vatine’s asymmetrical ethical care (2014), as required of us in pandemic-time. This requirement imposes an added burden on the analyst, who is, as Gendrault notes, like the analysand interpellated by the press of the Real. But I would add that the analyst must also strive to maintain, however precariously between memory and desire, a foothold in Symbolic time/order.

### **NOVEL IMAGINARIES: TOWARD A “RADICALLY DEMOCRATIC POSITION”**

Bion (1977, p. 296) suggested that every *new* thought, exceeding prior experience and custom, is tantamount to a “caesura,” a break that is a kind of birth experience. Such a break, explains Ogden (2020, p. 239), provides an opportunity to live reality in a way that is fresh, turbulent, and exquisitely alive.

Given that many of us have grown a bit inured to the weirdness of the age, the coronavirus (dare I say) may actually have already had some welcome effects. An uninvited stranger, it has imposed on us a Bionian caesura, during which we find ourselves confronting an alterity that is, like the virus itself, “novel.” We attempt to bar the gates against both the disease and its correlative unknowns, but they recognize no borders and can be neither surveilled nor imprisoned nor deported.

Leading social critics, before the pandemic and its quarantines, before the passionate mass uprisings, had anticipated our need for new imaginaries. Judith Butler (2020) called for overturning our “demographic imaginary,” the fictions that divide us along the lines of age, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and class. And she wonders whether

our vulnerability—our fundamental dependence and interdependence—and mutual ethical obligations might, once recognized, form a mobilizing force for new ways of perceiving and engaging with the world (for a recent interview with Butler, see Yancy 2020).

Amid the pandemic, Jean-Luc Nancy (2020) has appealed to the communal function of the virus. It “communizes us . . . bringing us together in the need to make a common stand.” Slavoj Žižek (2020)<sup>9</sup> sees a new imaginary already in process:

radical changes are already taking place. The coronavirus epidemic confronts us with something previously thought to be the impossible: the world as we knew it has stopped turning, whole countries are in a lockdown. . . . Our reaction to all of this, what we should do, should also be the impossible—what appears impossible within the coordinates of the existing world order. The impossible happened, our world has stopped, AND impossible is what we have to do to avoid the worst, which is—what? [p. 96].

The journalist Rebecca Solnit (2020) entertains similar possibilities, which she calls “love in action.” Not only might the pandemic spawn new imaginaries; to some degree, the “impossible has already happened.” Capitalist democracies, including even the U.S., are adopting measures of the dreaded welfare state, such as Ireland’s nationalizing of its hospitals and our domestic adoption of sick-leave rights and the provision of more housing for the homeless.

Such progress, however insignificant in the grander scheme of things, and despite the fact that half a billion more people are now poised on the brink of poverty, suggests that striving for a more equitable world is not hopelessly quixotic. It is in fact necessary, especially if we are to escape what Žižek fears might otherwise eventuate: “More than open barbarism I fear barbarism with a human face—ruthless survivalist measures enforced with regret and even sympathy, but legitimized by expert opinions” (p. 96).

The self-described “renegade economist” Kate Raworth thinks “it’s time to choose a higher ambition because humanity’s 21st century challenge is clear—to meet the needs of all people, within the means of this extraordinary, unique, living planet so that we and the rest of nature can thrive” (Purdy 2020). The social theorist Murray Bookchin has advocated

<sup>9</sup>Žižek credits Alenka Zupančič with inspiring his line of thought.

for an “irreducible minimum” of life conditions, a sort of universal Winnicottian facilitating environment. Eco-feminists, social ecologists, and other immodest types are calling for a wide range of conventionally inconceivable measures: the internationalizing of unions; open borders; regional bodies committed to gender equality and the empowerment of women<sup>10</sup>; and collective models of “data constitutionalism,” whereby citizens own their data and control its uses. What all these measures require first of all is “democratizing democracy.”<sup>11</sup>

And for democracy to be democratized, it must be decoupled from free market globalization and unregulated (or cynically regulated) capitalism—what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism”<sup>12</sup> and what Kimberlé Crenshaw (2020) elaborates as *racial* disaster capitalism. And it isn’t only familiar progressive figures or radical economists who say so. Some very capitalistic capitalists are advancing previously *verboden* notions. Here is what Macquarie Wealth, “one of the most capitalist companies in the world,” according to Paul Mason (2020), has told its investors: “Conventional capitalism is dying, or at least mutating into something closer to a version of communism.”

Mason, amplifying Solnit and Žižek, argues that “the unthinkable is here—all of it,” right now.<sup>13</sup> Drawing lessons for our eventual postpandemic times from the collapse of feudalism, he concludes that “capitalism is unlikely to survive, long term—and in the short term it can only survive by adopting features of ‘post-capitalism.’ . . . If the great plague of the 14th century triggered a post-feudal imagination, it is possible—and desirable—that this one triggers a post-capitalist imagination. And fast.” The recent, unprecedented mass protests against racial domination might be the first collective expression of a newly triggered consciousness.

If, as I’ve argued, we are all interpellated into a global psychoanalytic process, how then does psychoanalysis enter this conversation? Most of

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<sup>10</sup>Estimates suggest that women perform 76 percent of unpaid labor and account for 80 percent of those displaced by climate change.

<sup>11</sup>The phrase is Laura Basu’s, from “How to Fix the World” (2020). I refer readers to this essay for a comprehensive description of the range of ambitions and proposed interventions, including those mentioned in this paragraph.

<sup>12</sup>Klein describes how the coronavirus functions as a perfect opportunity for the playout of “shock doctrine”—“the political strategy of using large-scale crises to push through policies that systematically deepen inequality, enrich elites, and undercut everyone else” (Solis 2020).

<sup>13</sup>Mason (2020) elaborates: “Universal payments, state bailouts and the funding of state debts by central banks have all been adopted at a speed that has shocked even the usual advocates of these measures.”

us cherish the conviction that psychoanalysis is in its very fiber subversive, radical, emancipatory, and revolutionary. Many of us have been working toward a renewed vision of psychoanalytic possibilities: decolonialized, de-repressive, and democratizing of (and by) the disruptive motions of desire. New models of community psychoanalysis are being incubated at some institutes.<sup>14</sup> And yet psychoanalysis continues to perpetrate colonizing impacts, corrupting hypocrisies, racialized exclusions.

We must now be accountable for the validity of psychoanalysis as an emancipatory praxis, which is to say, to commit—beyond a mere balancing of individual and collective needs—to the inseparability of individual “freedom” and collective healing. And we must pivot from dismal forecasts to real innovations, corralling the multifarious ideas, hopes, and concessions emerging across disciplines and discourses. There may be no better opportunity for psychoanalysis to intervene than at a time when its signature so-called dual drives, death and life,<sup>15</sup> are so fiercely contesting. The fundamental human tensions we’ve exposed—between authoritarianism and egalitarianism, patriarchy and feminism, deceit and truth—have gone global. The repressed returns to reveal our complicity in the racialized horrors and brutal injustices we’ve long left unexamined, despite our professional convictions.

Our certainties and our hypocrisies have given way to a virus that is unpredictable in its effects not only on public health and macroeconomics, but also on the human body. Jolted off-course by the strange, and dispossessed of familiar crutches, we must do more than recognize the vicious binaries, and the paranoid/schizoid and incestuous political practices, in which we’ve been so long embedded. If there is any point that Black Lives Matter insists upon, it is this: We cannot return to a harmony that never was, to the fantasy of a cohesive, unified society. We must enable a radically inclusive and egalitarian public sphere, which means further reckonings with privilege and loss, and the redistribution of protection, precarity, and possibility. And with our *anti-blackness*. We can foster the emergence of immanent third spaces and thereby of desire, in all its errancy, queerness, and incoherent contradiction.

<sup>14</sup>Notably at the Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California (PINC) and at the Massachusetts Institute for Psychoanalysis (MIP).

<sup>15</sup>Or, put differently: when the divergent forms that “trieb” assumes (i.e., between deathfulness and lifefulness), as per Laplanche, by means of Barnaby Barratt’s translation (2019) of Laplanche’s take on this matter.

I suggest we return for guidance to the visionary calling of Carlos Castoriadis (1987), who recognized the need for a radical destruction of familiar institutions and for the creation of new imaginaries. We can also inscribe into our theory such a new imaginary, a new (dis)order of what is otherwise: a democratic, contradictory, uncanny Strange. This novel conceptual space would be a “position” beyond the depressive position, that reliable old “final outpost” of healing and “postoeidipal” living. There, mourning and reparative gestures might, given the agency and accountability accrued through the depressive position, unleash a vibrant, depressive, emancipatory praxis. This praxis would be inaugurated by signage of the strange and guided by desire and its drive toward truth, but also toward paradox and uncertainty, in their irruptive, ecstatic, incessant motions.

This would be a radical democratic imaginary position. I think of this as a mobilization of Frantz Fanon’s vision for a “collective rise of humanity . . . an irrepressible and implacable quest for liberty [that] required the mobilization of all of life’s reserves” (Achille 2017, p. 162). Resonant too is Julia Kristeva’s call for “intimate revolt” (1997, 1998), psychic evolutions of return, rupture, and rebirth: transgressive rupturing action not only displaces the past but unleashes a vitalizing *jouissance* and potential for rebirth and for bearing together its “undreamt dreams” (Ogden 2005). Such collective ability to sustain destabilizing new ideas opens us “to a freer speech that provides ethical and creative direction, its erotic telos” (Gentile 2016, p. 52).

This radical upheaval of psychic life is inseparable from the action of political renewal, and suggests that any approach to a new psychoanalytic imaginary will be chaotic, unpredictable, destabilizing, and wildly and fearsomely oscillating (between hope and despair, courage and terror) far beyond mere repetition and its insistently “managed,” subterranean breakdown fear.<sup>16</sup> As breakdown fears give way to breakdown, the mutual antagonism between death and life, deathfulness and lifefulness, take on a raw, bold, and dramatic dynamic tension. This is not to minimize the stakes, including the risk and possibility of (at the very least) psychic death and actual painful losses, and very real moments of hopelessness, despair, and utterly frenzied fury. But new instabilities mark the opening of

<sup>16</sup>For McAfee, virulent nationalisms that deny the historical contingency of identity are the operation of breakdown fears on a political scale.

ourselves, psychically and (trans)corporeally, to the tenuous revitalizing evolutions of rebirth and their potential for cataclysmic transformation.

Here is where psychoanalysis, even if it's not done reckoning with its own insights and blind spots, needs to step in. If we can truly listen and translate what the public is speaking—what bodies in isolation and bodies in the street are seeking—we might “flesh out” a long-theorized epic battle that has eluded clinical narration (or at least has remained undernarrativized). We might at least, and at last, turn and face the strange—the alien/other to us, beyond us, within us.

In this turn, as I imagine it, our investments in the Same are disrupted by what the philosopher Alain Badiou (see Hallward 2004) identifies as the four modes of truth: revolution, passion, invention, and creation. The subject of/to truth, Badiou says, is unspecifiable, both singular and same/universal, a contradictory subject of “‘generic’ singularity.” In my view, our actions, as subjects of/to truth, would no longer be confined to assimilative practices (binary division, colonization, hierarchy, possession). They would include reparative actions, already espoused by many, oriented not only toward past injustices (collective or individual) and one's love/hate objects, but also toward actually novel futures, visions of (im)possibility yet to come, yet to be reborn, for a first time.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, this novel imaginary would operate dialectically with the mourning and reparative gestures of the depressive position, sustaining the ambiguity and paradox of unresolved tensions.

Such steps would require us to hold passionately to our convictions and remain true to communitarian ethics. What might on the surface look like a collapse to the boldness of paranoid-schizoid splitting is actually an expression of agency and determined action to foster mutually reinforcing commitments between the heterogeneous individual and the heterogeneous collective. In the resultant pluritemporal, emancipatory space, conflict is inevitable, always adding a tragic dimension (a refusal to deny both the risk and reality of death) to our perpetual quest to bridge divides, and let differences thrive. Our distinctive talents, imagination, and capacities might then find revitalized collective (perhaps even global) purpose, but only if we surrender certainty and remain open to the strange and its wildness in a kind of interminable analysis.

<sup>17</sup>It seems a hopeful sign that across the globe huge swaths of people, especially the young, do not hesitate to utter the word *socialism*, or to embrace a new kind of communism, and who (in word if not always in deed) passionately reject the neoliberal patriarchal order.

If we are joined in this radical democratic imaginary as truly equal, singular, and universal subjects, it is also because we concede that our agency is ever partial: we are forever disrupted, actually drawn by, what both transcends and joins us—the Real’s novel energies, matter’s dynamism (Barad 2007) and its untranslatable excesses. We are also significantly accountable to them, guided by them but also intervening in them so as to practice a paradoxical freedom in a revelatory fidelity to truth.

The dis/order of the Strange, then, offers a return on the psychoanalytic promise: radical subversion of the previous order. It tantalizes us with an eroticized, disruptive, forever incessant and aleatory mutuality of transformation, born of surrender to each other and to what lies beyond us and what also holds us,<sup>18</sup> calls us, unsettles us.

### CAUTIONARY TALES

Ogden (1992, pp. 234–235) advises the analyst to listen for cautionary tales in the initial analytic meeting. The patient, he tells us, will let us know why the treatment will fail; the seeds of its demise are planted at first communication. We might even say that one such cautionary tale is embedded in the history of psychoanalysis. Freud tells us how our primal myths both allure and revolt us, above all the oedipal myth of the primal scene. It reminds us unwillingly of our incestuous longings, and of our refutations of law. We may prefer blindness to our desire, and deafness to the prophecy, but gods will periodically intervene, sometimes with plagues, forcing our surrender to truthfulness, to self-dissolution, to the (im)possibilities of caesura.

We are always longing to some degree for rebirth, but this longing has become a fever in plague-time. Many of us have turned to literature for deeper insight into what we’re enduring—to Camus’s *The Plague* or Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*; or Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera*, or even Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. Meanwhile, journalists and historians rehash cautionary tales from many eras: the histories of the bubonic plague, smallpox, cholera, the Spanish flu, Ebola, AIDS, and other sometimes blissfully forgotten pandemics—and also the climate

<sup>18</sup>Though the topic is beyond the scope of this essay, I believe (see Gentile 2016) that a radically inclusive democratic transition requires a surrender to psychoanalysis’s “feminine law,” beyond the colonizing law and order of patriarchy. See Kristeva’s recent appeal to the “transformative feminine” (2019) and its resonance with Mbembe’s characterization of Fanon’s puncturing and transforming “metaphoric thought” (Mbembe 2017, p. 162).

catastrophes of past and present. Human beings have endured waves of pandemic and pestilence; and despite any benefits derived from past experience, we must each time experience what Paul Theroux (2020) describes as “the same upside-down-ness and the dizziness it produces, the muddle of daily life, the collapse of commerce, the darkness at noon, a haunting paranoia in the sudden proximity to death.”

And each scourge, each plague, each of Gendrault’s “emergencies of the Real,” reveals a human longing for *Real* change, and for *Real* solidarity—and the wishful belief that, if nothing else, we will learn together from all the freshly exposed suffering and the injustice. Things won’t—they can’t—return to the same old.

Until they do and we do.

History, like psychoanalysis, teaches us that we are avid hunters of the strange and the novel in the order of the familiar. Prior to any actual reckoning with the strange—which would require us to transform ourselves, and thus in a sense *become strange to ourselves*—we do our best to neutralize its threat by imposing order upon it. Or, perhaps more precisely, we hope to catch it while it’s still just “weird.” We wrangle with alterity, putting it in order, “getting our minds around it,” paradigmatically slotting it into categories such as “strange,” “other,” “foreign,” “ethnic,” “refugee,” “sexually deviant.” And so we familiarize (de-strange) the strange, with essential help from binarism.

Assimilation always triumphs (if only in our totalizing fantasy) over the excessive. True, not all excess can be contained or absorbed or symbolically grasped; still, we will don once again our omnipotence, even if it’s become a bit tattered. It’s as if alterity taxes our being to its elusive, enigmatic, and already broken breaking point. In this way it presses us beyond the repression barrier to encounter what lies entangled within, what is otherwise consciously inconceivable, so as to expose our efforts at reproducing sameness as a fantasy. Sameness is always already touched by the strange.

The psychoanalyst must wonder what remains untranslated from earlier plague eras. What “unconscious errand”—such that, per Maurice Apprey (2014), “*What happens now shall have already happened*” (p. 16)—does the new plague reveal, and might it enable us to fulfill a deferred ancestral mission? What doom was prophesied then and what historical trauma sequestered? What doom, but also what desire, might already have been spelled out for us now? What kind of breakdown, what reckoning with prior unrealized breakdowns, must we first experience if

any true democratic imaginary is actually to have a chance? Jacqueline Rose (2020), mining Camus, notes that “the pestilence is at once blight and revelation. It brings the hidden truth of a corrupt world to the surface.”

Alongside these questions, if, with Martin Luther King, we recognize that “in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard,” we must also ask: what voices, whose message, what message, so far remains unheard, unheeded? As I write, the nation is gearing up for a startlingly unnerving presidential campaign season, even while consciously anticipating a second wave of the coronavirus, and while remaining unsure of its ultimate toll. And despite the omnipresence of this invisible stranger, mass protests against racial injustice carry on, producing some real effects, some—such as the dismantling—abolition—of police departments—previously (in action) unthinkable. From my vantage point, the strange (and the affect that circulates it) is becoming in quick succession, if not in near simultaneity, more startling, more grim, more exciting, more ominous, more intoxicating, and more deadly. And at the same time, it’s growing more familiar, courting taboo and tragedy—prerequisites for transformation.

When we follow the trail of signifiers that leads us to that knot where the familiar meets the strange, we discover we’ve arrived, by way of returning to plague-time, at the primal myths of psychoanalysis. They tell us about what is most resistant to conscious contemplation: our incestuous longings, wherein desire (what is alien to us) fastens onto what/who is most familiar. Yet if novelty is inscribed upon our incestuous fantasy, then herd immunity requires the intervention of the stranger, a radical disruptor of the incestuous familiar and its reproduction of the same. Incestuous family dynamics brought a plague upon Thebes.<sup>19</sup> They gave way to an origin myth of a racially and religiously “pure” America, a “perverse glorification of the Symbolic’s white ideals” (George 2017, p. 133). Today they foster a culture of authoritarianism, with hermetically sealed loyalties locking out and annulling difference, reproducing a traumatic and toxic history.

The tyranny of the familiar, of the self-identical—of its seductive allures but fatal confinements—requires a novel invader if it is to be decoronated. If, that is, democracy and its radical novel imaginary are to finally, *Really*, flourish, in all their contradiction, so vital to life’s

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<sup>19</sup>Vigdis Sønge-Møller’s insight’s (2010) into the incestuous and deadly self-identical dynamics at play in *Antigone* influenced my thinking here.

indigenous potentialities and generative tensions. If we finally dare to “turn and face the strange.”

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