On Being Haunted By the Present

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Why does the past have such a hold socially, culturally and emotionally is the central question of this article. While all temporalities are laden with emotion and fantasy the past seems to have a specific grip. Drawing on psychosocial theory [psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory] to elaborate the concept of the shadow, which I argue haunts subjectivity but this is not just a personal matter as all societies are full of ghosts and phantoms which are laden with socio-emotional weight. While it is commonplace to argue that the past haunts representations and fantasies of the present and the future, I move towards exploring how being haunted by the past avoids the poignant and evocative nature of the present. At the hub of this article is a preoccupation with the following—what would have to be relinquished—politically, socially, theoretically, emotionally—if we stop turning back and become haunted not by the past but rather by our responsibilities to the present and future?

On Curious Subjectivity

The question why does the past have such a hold arose powerfully after I finished writing an article on postcolonial masculinity. That particular essay settled (if one ever can) on an exploration of how a history of colonialism impacted on my Egyptian/Muslim father, and hopefully its title, ‘Injurious Imperialism: Reflecting on my Father’ (Treacher Kabesh 2009), illustrates some of what I wished to explore. Following its completion, I was left with a number of theoretical and personal concerns. Why does the past have such a hold? Why does it seem to capture and hold me in its grip, if not its thrall? These questions are not just personal ones, as they are resonant with certain theoretical tendencies and with particular consequences. I am
concerned with understanding the present, and moving towards the future; temporalities that are together with the past, laden with emotions and fantasies. Importantly, the present is a temporal zone we can influence, albeit partially, as we are capable of taking some limited and complex responsibility for our actions, thoughts, emotions and the consequences of our impact on others and the social world.

A contention of this essay is that the past, present and future cannot be separated as they are intertwined in a complex knot of temporality, experience and identity. Theoretical, emotional and cultural attention can be given over to and invested in the past, that which has been lost and that has never been. I explore in this essay two separate and interlinked themes—first, how the past endures, and is endured, in the present, and interlinked, the question of why the past has such a hold. Second, the essay aims to open up the frequently troublesome difficulties human beings can have in inhabiting the present and imagining a different future. In short, I have been attempting to prise apart and understand the following difficulty: why does adherence to, and disavowal of, the past hinder a different relationship to the present and future?

I would like to make clear the conceptual psychoanalytic framework that I am working with in relation to time and history. While cognitive sciences provide useful accounts of rationality and cognition, I am much more reliant on psychoanalysis to explicate a subjectivity marked by ‘the activity of the unconscious and with a complex and elusive structure’ (Kennedy 2010, p. 180). This subjectivity, with its curious ‘multi-layered fragments of memory, odd bits of debris from the past, dream elements, gaping absences, convincing and also unconvincing stories, a history of discontinuities and unresolved questions, of traumas, things unsaid, and memories actively destroyed’ (2010, p. 181).

As is well known the prevalent psychoanalytic view is that the unconscious does not know and resists time—different temporalities co-exist in a kaleidoscope of timelessness. Sigmund Freud’s theory revolves around the question of a past. He argues that the past is repressed and never forgotten but through a psychoanalytic analysis the individual can remember the event more fully with added intricate associations, imaginings and feelings so that these can be replaced with a fuller complex understanding of the possible event. Melanie Klein, however, has a different concept of time. Her contribution is to ‘chart an area where present and past are one and time is spatial, not historical’ (Mitchell 1986, p. 28). Klein’s understanding adds an important dimension, because in her view it is not just that the past cannot be left behind; but crucially, the past is always in, cannot be separated out from, the present.

There are always personal investments in time and temporalities, for as Eva Hoffman points out, there can be different personal predilections towards the temporal zones and their possible
meanings: for example, nostalgia as a wish for a return to the past, excitement about the future, the wish for moments of heightened intensity in the present (Hoffman 2009). Felt time can provoke pain and/or pleasure, crucially it is never neutral. We all exist within a fundamental paradox for objective time rolls on with its inexorable logic and yet internal time is polysemous and moves within many directions, for

...even as we adjust to the demands of social and external time in our actions, inner time moves within more multilayered and multidirectional topologies—folding and unfolding from the moment to full extension, winding and unwinding from fast to slow, conflating past and present into one perception, or uncoiling into the distant future with gliding ease. (Hoffman 2009, p. 104)

Within a psychoanalytic framework the present is made up of memories and perceptions from the past. A dominant view is that the past is ambiguous, as historical material is always over-determined and multi-layered. Within this viewpoint, the past always adds to the present and the opposite process is simultaneously in operation, as, in going over the past, new events and/or mental states are recollected so that ‘the past becomes a kind of layering of narratives, each ordering the revival of the past in different ways with different intentions (Bollas 1995, p. 115).

Daniel Mendelsohn begins his book *The Lost* with the following quotation from Proust: ‘When we have passed a certain age, the soul of the child we were and the souls of the dead from whom we have sprung come to lavish on us their riches and their spells’ (2008). I use this quote here to highlight the shards that we inherit and inhabit. As Mark Freeman contends,

much of what we remember about the personal past is suffused with others’ memories, which are themselves suffused with other other’s memories ... much of what we remember is also suffused with stories we have read and images we have seen, in books and movies and beyond. (Freeman 2010, p. 263)

All of these images, representations, complex stories are folded into a narrative which is full of memories (our own and others”), and the stories we tell along with the inchoate memories we ‘remember' become codified and solidified (Freeman 2010, p. 264).

Psychoanalytic theory is based on the view that the past is inescapable and that our ‘...inner landscapes are peopled with the burdens of history ... a history not of [our own] choosing unfolds in the deepest recesses of the mind’ (Rose 1998, p. 6). The past is problematic, for while in one sense, it is past, there is always the continual threat of the repressed or indeed the oppressed. These internalised relationships to history are embedded in the unconscious, are stubbornly durable and relentlessly pervasive as they constitute our deepest and most stubborn attachments. The mind is a
palimpsest, as traces of the past remain; they persevere in the present despite our best efforts to disavow these traces. The palimpsest mind contains the social and political past, for as Stephen Frosh puts it the mind is in constant dialogue with the world as it takes that which is external, makes something of it ‘finding ways of producing internal representations of what it finds (out)there’ (Frosh 2002b). What happens out there, critically becomes internalised and develops into part of the mind as part of the unconscious.

Subjectivity, therefore, is forged through and within relations with others, and in turn is formed and inhabited through specific cultural periods. In short, the “shadow of the other” (to draw on a pertinent phrase from Jessica Benjamin 1998), is always at work at personal and social levels. The concept of the shadow is vital for my analysis as all societies are full of ghosts, spectres and phantoms, which are all too real and full of socio-emotional weight. They haunt persistently and as the shadow is glimpsed, as a turn is made to making these spectres tangible, the shadows elude and mock as we try to make concrete and coherent the complexities of socio-political life and ‘the shreddedness of lived experience’ (Bollas 1995, p. 118). I am preoccupied, in part, with drawing out and elucidating the silences and absences which I sense are in operation and that have profound effects on socio-political-emotional interactions and interrelations. I am influenced by Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* (1997), especially for the way she raises and does not let go of the elusive, the enigmatic, and glimpsed absences. Her chapter on ‘Distractions’ in particular is an inspiration in relation to how following one’s curiosities and vague threads, that being relentless in wondering why a woman is missing from a photograph (the woman is the psychoanalyst Lou Andreas-Salome) leads to opening up important theorisations.

This article arises from a larger project entitled *Landscapes of Masculinities: In the Shadow of the Other*, that I am currently working on. Through this project, I am attempting to trace male subjectivities in Egypt and the UK, and I am engaged in tracing through what is shared and distinctive in these seemingly diverse subjectivities. In this article I draw on two different novels, *Chicago* (Al Aswany 2007) which focuses on Egyptian men living in Chicago and *Our Fathers* (O’Hagan 2004), which reads more like a memoir but is a novel that traces through three generations of men from the same family. Despite their diversity, these two novels explore matters of the persistence of the past, the difficulties of masculine subjectivity in relation to authority, power and responsibility. In short, they represent the troublesome endeavour of masculinity struggling to find itself. Moreover, I reflect on the life of my father to locate him in a socio-political context which is powerful and pervasive. I approach this inevitably as a daughter, and I am sure I am not alone in this: my love of my father is frequently strong yet ambivalent. Alongside the intensity of this love there is disappointment, disillussionment and the profound wish that my father had been more powerful than was possible. Briefly, my father was Egyptian and Muslim, committed to Egypt and profoundly political. He was of the generation that was
active in the 1952 Revolution which disposed the Egyptian royalty and Government and—crucially—British colonial rule.

These reflections on my father, along with the novels, hopefully open up and elucidate my conceptual puzzles that focus on the psychosocial relations of postcolonial masculinities. In keeping within a psychosocial framework of being engaged with that which is absent, silent and silenced, I draw on what Frosh has described as ‘the psychology of hinting’ (Frosh 2002a). The novels, different in tone, rhythm and plot, set in different places (Chicago and Glasgow) represent partial and significant aspects of masculinity, and explore how masculinity is inhabited. The novels and my narrative of my father allude to and gesture at that which is present and absent. The novels suggest the existence of other things, beyond or at least different from that articulation. In gender formations, this means that the seeming security of, for instance, ‘masculinity’ hints at what else might have been, what is lost or hidden, what loves prohibited and intimacies renounced’ (Frosh 2002a, p. 18). For all narratives and stories are not just ‘a version of what might be, they hint, individually and collectively, at some other demand, some hope for recognition and acknowledgement’ (Frosh 2002a, p. 18). I use these novels along with my memories and understanding of my father to explore issues that are pertinent yet buried, in the attempt to render explicit that which can be implicit, and to open up, through the concept of haunting, ‘the possibility of representing “unspeakable things unspoken” and that which is beyond language’ (Edwards 2008, p. 119).

Through this article I am trying to make good my previous disquiets and discomfort. I have spent much energy, time and intellectual endeavours attempting to understand the effects of colonisation on masculinities especially. While this work has value I always felt as if ‘something’ was missing, that my thinking wrapped up issues too quickly in order to provide some semblance of coherence and, as much as I rely on psychoanalysis, the irrational and the elusive escaped me. Psychoanalysis offers the most understanding and perspicacity when it can be used to enable knowledge of that which is excessive, outside of rational control and the inexorable pull of repetition. Above all it is most of value when we can use psychoanalytic theory to surprise and unsettle what we imagine we have known and understood. When, in short, we can allow the shadows of our disquiets to have their full sway and voice.

Tracing Absent Presences

Alongside psychoanalytic theory I am also reliant on postcolonial theory, as my persistent theoretical and political preoccupations centre on elucidating the possible inter-relations of subjectivities that inhabit either the Middle East (specifically Egypt) and the West (particularly the UK). In relation to this article I am dependent on the view that postcolonial theory works on a double edge of attempting to
understand what occurred: these understandings are continually haunted and shadowed by what might have been, in order to reveal the full extent of the exploitation, corrosion and diminishment of colonised peoples and societies; even if at the same time we need to recognise that the ‘notion of independence is politically and psychologically a myth’ (Edwards 2008, p. 124). This is an important axis of understanding which focuses on working towards uncovering memories, acts of resistance and complicity, and holding in mind what might have been, so that a different imaginative reckoning with the past can be made.

There are a number of different axes of analysis of temporality, which can contradict each other and needless to say there is no hierarchical order as the various emphases on the past change and exist simultaneously. The first axis focuses on the past as that which we have left behind; the past as precisely that: past. The second axis is redolent with discourses that represent the past as prevalent and dominating of the present. Interwoven throughout this second axis are the rife (if not ubiquitous) viewpoints that the past is a point of knowledge and should be used to ensure a better present for individuals and societies.

Andrew O’Hagan’s novel Our Fathers (2004) is a poignant exploration of how the past persists in the present, affecting and effecting, influencing and making existing relations between a grandfather, father, and son/grandson. This novel is profoundly affecting and almost intolerably painful to read. Jamie, a central character of the novel, (along with his grandfather), tells of his train journey to visit his grandparents and to take care of his dying grandfather. Even though he is aged 35, he sees the image of himself as a little boy reflected in the window; what he smells and sees are the smells and shadows of his young self (2004, p. 52). The present does not exist, or rather the past is so omnipresent that it has more reality, stuff and resonance than the present time. The shadows ‘were all that I knew and remembered’; these shadows illustrate de Alwis’s apt phrase of the absent presence (2009). The important theoretical task is to trace through that which is elusive but present, that which cannot be grasped but haunts in all its loaded reality, that which is absent and yet so present. Malathi de Alwis, drawing on Derrida, explores, or rather argues for the importance of the trace—with its multiple implications of mark, wake, track, spoor, footprint, imprint—as undecipherable that is neither fully present nor fully absent (de Alwis 2009, p. 238).

We remember, we talk, we tell our stories, and all of these are inflected by the past—our own and others’. We are all in the grip of what Abraham and Torok have elaborated as ‘transgenerational haunting’ (1994). We affect each other in ways that are ‘immediate and invisible, mental states are communicated, indeed transferred, from one psyche to another not only through rational message, but along conscious, or at least non-conscious channels (Hoffman 2010,
For Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, haunting is the secret carried within families and across generations. These secrets have life. We know about them, deny their existence and capitulate to them as we struggle to get through everyday living. As Hoffman points out, part of the difficulty for the second generations is that shadows are inherited but not the experience (2010, p. 411). Furthermore, ‘wrestling with shadows can be more frightening, more confusing, than struggling with solid realities’ (2010, p. 411).

There are many diverse ways of living with shadows and what disappoints. The narratives are individual and social. Freud's short and suggestive essay entitled 'Family Romance' (1909) explores why so many children are convinced that they have been adopted, kidnapped or the victim of a mistake at the hospital. Inevitably the child imagines that s/he belongs to a royal or prestigious family. This is a class-based narrative, and while it is held dear by many individuals, it can and does operate at the level of cultural fiction. Haughton points out that the link between fantasies and cultural fictions reveals 'that it is our own and our culture's disowned past that continues to haunt us' (Haughton 2003, p. xii).

These cultural narratives dominate, constrain and involve a will to totality that, for Kaja Silverman, entail profoundly 'the mechanism by which a society tries to institute itself on the basis of closure, the fixation of meanings' (Silverman 1992). Further, the dominant fiction 'neutralises the contradictions which organise the social formation by fostering collective identifications and desires. Social formations constantly depend upon their dominant fictions for their sense of unity and identity' (Silverman 1992, p. 54). For example, in Egypt it is not unusual for the wars of 1967 and 1973 to inhabit people's imaginations, and men may be led to make the decision to join the Army based on these representations and social narratives.

Ghosts of the past whisper, they have presence: as they move across the present, these spectres 'occupy the mental terrain within us and the silences on that old ground, where shifting wraiths pass or speak in voices so low we can't hear what they are saying' (Hustvedt 2008, p. 278). They haunt and continually hint at what lies beneath, and while they have a powerful and unseen force, they can be sensed but not necessarily known, for we are in the sphere of 'inarticulate experiences, of symptoms and screen memories, of spiralling affects, of more than one story at a time, of the traffic in domains of experience that are anything but transparent and referential' (Gordon 1997, p. 25). These silences and secrets are prevalent, powerful, and yet elusive. They are powerfully felt and have material and political effects.

Dominick LaCapra makes an important distinction between loss (involving particular events and thus specific and historical) and absence (transhistorical, abstract, evacuated, disembodied). He argues that when such distinctions are conflated and when loss is
converted into absence one faces 'the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted' (LaCapra 2001, p. 240). Importantly, for LaCapra, this very conflation 'attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions' (2001, p. 241); and while I agree that it is important to hold this distinction in mind, I am also influenced by de Alwis, who explores how it is important to think about this moment of conjuncture between loss and absence and to understand the affectual burdens of hauntings (de Alwis 2009).

LaCapra is concerned to argue that the blurring of distinctions, that the very confluences of absences and loss, bear witness to the way one remains possessed and haunted by the past, as ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions (LaCapra 2001, p. 46). This view has resonance in Christopher Bollas’s essay ‘The Functions of History’ (1995); in this essay Bollas explores how facts have little meaning in and of themselves as they can flatten out experience and imaginative responses. Importantly for Bollas significance occurs in the meanings, fantasies and feelings that are given to events (1995, p. 110), and he explores how we can feel emptied and wiped out by facts and events, and the continuing consequences of the past on the present. One way that I can understand the way my mind freezes, becomes paralysed, is to know that we can feel emptied by facts, and helpless in the face of the consequences of socio-political events.

Absence, Silences and Shards

My father was often silent about the effects of colonialism on Egypt and Egyptian masculinity. His silence can be seen as an understandable response to history and is testimony 'that nothing much comes to mind' and to 'the disseminative effect of thought itself' (Bollas 1995, p. 113). In his memoir Out of Place (2000) Edward Said’s description of his silent, resolute, almost impervious father has always resonated for me as an apt description of my father, grandfather and many men of my father’s generation—for example, my uncles and his friends. The endeavours to understand silence, absences and transgenerational matters started in July 2002 when I happened to be in Cairo (this was also the last occasion I spent time with my father as he died in the November of that year). July 2002 marked the 50th anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution. The celebrations gripped the nation and were the only topic of conversation. Needless to say the media was full of celebration, a discourse of unfettered progress and modernity dominated. Yet, in private something else was happening altogether—my father could not stop crying over his perceived failure of the Revolution (in our home we had to call it a coup). I was shocked and at some profound level I still am—I had never seen my father like this. I then discovered that many men of a certain age and class were also crying copiously. Partly this was nostalgia for the songs, music and literature of that
time, their lost youth and perhaps above all a time of hope and optimism. When I first started thinking about the tears and also the silences I attempted to trace the failure of the revolution through matters of internalised humiliation and shame (Treacher 2007). Through this essay, I want to think through silences and absences from a different angle, focusing on memory, the absent-presence (as described by de Alwis 2009), loss and matters of haunting.

I have a tendency to be harsh in relation to silence and demand of people that they speak. I used to feel irked by my father’s tendency to be taciturn: I too easily perceive silence as refusal, and I need to be kinder in order to understand silences and absences in people’s talk and politics of the past. Bollas opens up the possibility that when we say the following truisms—the past is past, it’s done with, forget it—maybe we are directing our reluctant attention to something which is meant to be forgotten. He asks whether this in part explains why it is so difficult to remember our past: ‘not because we cannot recollect but perhaps because we are aware we are not meant to “delve into the past” and/or to awaken the past’ (Bollas 1995, p. 117). We need to remember, though, that silences and absences can often arise from the intolerability of what is and what has been, and this knowledge is after all unbearable.

Silence and talk arise from double consciousness, and here I am using this term to refer to the possibility and impossibility of knowledge. Much public discourse and private conversation in Egypt is preoccupied with the colonised history, with the cruel and damning effects of imperialism, with matters fiscal, and so on. Yet, there can be strange silences and absences. For these men of my father’s generation were (are) silent when it came to their own subjectivity and the consequences of the past on their own actions, feelings and imaginations. It is this silence that I think is problematic, for it can gag a different route into the present and the future. Silence and talk are closely interlinked processes. To talk can silence the other, to remember one thing is to forget another issue, on the other hand silence can render different possibilities unavailable and unimaginable.

Silence, however, cannot be equated only with absence, with a lack of knowledge, with not knowing what to say. It does not occur only because of vulnerability and fragility. Silence can be just that—an active choice that signals that it is the only place to be. At other times silence arises from a fear of being done and undone by language as sometimes to give voice to secret fears, fantasies and thoughts can risk feeling unravelled and overwhelmed with the socio-political-emotional weight of what has occurred and is happening in the loaded present time. My father would declare frequently that ‘I did not know’ in a manner that resonates with Paul Gilroy’s pertinent puzzle of a social (and I would add individual) state of mind ‘in which tragic and disturbing events punctuate quieter periods of apparent forgetting that endure long enough for the inevitable lament of ‘we did not know’ to
appear plausible’ (Gilroy 2006, p. 29). We are in the vexed arena of belief and values and these are inevitably caught up in our psychic lives and are embroiled in 'our most heartfelt and obdurate attachment both to others and parts of ourselves' (Rose 2004, p. xix).

On Repetition and Disavowal

There are contradictions that work at the centre of relationships to the past. These contradictions can stem from a wish to hang onto the past, as if the past is the only temporality that matters, or from the opposite wish that focuses on disavowing the past. Various temporalities fold into each other; the past is never just the past. While there is always an intricacy in, and impossibility of, gleaning and understanding the gaps and losses in the written word or that which is thought, the novel Chicago explicitly explores how history persists in the present. Two of the main characters in this novel are Salah and Ra’fat, Egyptian Professors of Medicine at the University of Chicago, who represent different emotional tendencies to the past and the present. The representations of Salah’s relationship to his history tend to be ambivalent and contradictory, while Ra’fat is more resolute to leave the past behind him as he declares ‘I have got rid of, for good, Eastern backwardness’ (Al Aswany 2007, p. 53). Salah is haunted by his despair, which is palpable. He is haunted by the past and as the novel progresses he retreats increasingly from present time. Salah’s distress at his past and what he has lost, or indeed never possessed, becomes his undoing as he slowly unravels professionally and personally as the novel progresses.

While certain versions or specific events hang over—pervade conversation and political discourse—there is also the opposite pull that is to continually assert progress and that the past is precisely that: past. Ra’fat is invested absolutely in identifying as an American. He is resolute and stubborn in his identifications, as he

became American in every respect: he no longer spoke Arabic at all, thought in English, and spoke it with a cleverly acquired American accent. He even shrugged his shoulders and gestured and made sounds while speaking exactly like Americans … That was the image that he loved of himself: to be a complete genuine American, pure and without blemish. (2007, p. 29)

Both Salah and Ra’fat are undone by different adherences—Salah to the past and Ra’fat to the present. Ra’fat clings tightly to an identity and an identification of imagined superiority. He ruthlessly forgets what he inherited, for the ego can only come to ‘believe in its own supremacy by blocking out shades and layers of former identifications’ (Rose 1998, p. 40).

Similarly, Jamie in the novel Our Fathers is a construction engineer; but while his grandfather was a notable figure in the Glasgow housing sector, devoting his energy and passion to reforming slum housing and overseeing the building of high rise blocks, Jamie uses his skills
to pull down high rise blocks as their promise is literally blown apart. Needless, to say his grandfather is still an alive presence in Jamie’s emotional life, for as Walcott asserts in his exploration of repudiation, a disavowal of the past is part of an assertion of the self outside of the sins of the fathers (in Edwards 2008). But as Justin Edwards asserts, such disavowals do not work, for the whispers of history are utterances ‘made by disembodied voices that are, like other hauntings, unavoidable and inevitable’ (Edwards 2008, p. 122).

It is a different matter when the compulsion to repeat is enacted at the level of socio-political conditions. There can be, as Hoffman in her poignant essay ‘The Long Afterlife of Loss’ (2010) explores, an erosion, if not collapse, of distinctions between then and now, of inherited memory and experience of the events, and this can lead to empathetic identification at best and incorporation at worse (LaCapra 2001, p. 47). Compulsive repetition can be a response to a history of colonisation and becoming like the coloniser has problematic appeal in which endless corruption is repeated without end. For example, Ahmed (a problematic character in the novel Chicago) is resolutely intent on gaining power through corruption, spying, and exploiting his peers and his wife. He represents the pull towards endless repetition, mimicry and imitation.

Repetition and mimicry are responses to a problematic social history, and while Ahmed is a crude example of imitation, different longings can also pulse away. My father, who undertook his doctorate in London during the late 1940s was proud to be Egyptian, indeed he gave much to his country and simultaneously he was also proud that he was seen as ‘European, indeed ‘more English than the English’. Longing and pride are a lethal mix, producing impasses, and as Bollas points out, the repressed as opposed to the past signifies the preserved: hidden away in the organised tensions of the unconscious, wishes and their memories are ceaselessly struggling to find some way into gratification in the present’ (Bollas 1995, p. 118). In short, desire, albeit based on identification and mimicry, ‘refuses annihilation’ (1995, p. 118).

LaCapra is keen to stress that acknowledging and affirming or working through absence as absence requires the recognition of both the dubious nature of ultimate solutions and the necessary anxiety that cannot be eliminated from the self or projected onto others (LaCapra 2001, p. 64). An important theme in LaCapra’s thinking is that loss is exactly that—loss and knowing about what is absent and what is lost allows a working through of the hauntings of deeds done. Mourning is the critical response and not endless melancholia. However, for David Eng and David Kazanjian melancholia offers a ‘capaciousness of meaning in relation to losses encompassing the individual and the collective, the spiritual and the material, the psychic and the social, the aesthetic and the political’ (2003, p. 3). For Eng and Kazanjian, melancholia is ‘the adamant refusal of closure’ and refusal is resistance to acceptance of loss, of damage, and the
melancholic refuses to foreclose on what should and could have been.

As LaCapra points out, following Freud, melancholia can be unashamed, remains withdrawn and inactive, and in short is solipsistic. As poignantly described in Our Fathers,

Our fathers were made for grief. I could see it now. And all our lives we waited for sadness to happen. Their sunny days were trapped in a gold shag box. Those Scottish fathers. Not for nothing their wives cried, not for nothing their kids ... men gone way too sick for the talking. And how they lived in the dark for us now. Or lived in our faces, long denied. And where were our fathers? (O’Hagan 2004, p. 53)

These men spend endless hours staring into space without even the energy to speak and while they are withdrawn, Salah, in Chicago, provides a different melancholic response. Salah is increasingly distressed by his past, what he has lost or never possessed, and slowly unravels professionally and personally. He spends more time in the basement of his home listening to classical Egyptian music, wearing old clothes, and thinks of the ‘sorrows of the past sixty years’ (Al Aswany 2007, p. 89). He suffers profoundly when he is unable to deliver a pre-arranged confrontation to the Egyptian President; rather he delivers a bland speech of praise and gratitude. In this way, Salah painfully repeats both his own personal and the political history of that generation that has not been able, for complex reasons, to confront the Egyptian regime. Paralysed by fear, Salah cannot speak the challenging words that had been agreed, feels humiliated, profoundly shamed and commits suicide. Men suffer through melancholia, which hurts and causes dreams and different imaginings to die.

The Troubling Present

It is unclear quite what we need the past for and what it is we need the past to do—do we need the past to provide coherence, consolation, reassurance, triumph? As Adam Phillips points out, we want to recover, acknowledge and mourn our losses as if knowledge of the past can be the only thing that matters and much is expected of this new knowledge (Phillips 2007). I have started to realize that I am the one who haunts my father and that I am the one who shadows him. The novels that have been discussed in this article, Chicago and Our Fathers, are redolent with how the past haunts, how inter-relationships (socio-political-emotional) are full of the shadows of the other, of the past, of how individuals are full of their own shadows that continually persist and are active in all aspects of our lives. It has increasingly become important to me for theoretical/political/emotional reasons to recognise how I haunt and shadow the other. It is I who have locked my father firmly to the past, and I now have an ethical responsibility—for want of a better expression—to release him. I am unconvinced that it is those of the past that haunt the present—and I am quite certain that it is me hanging onto the past—but I repeat the
question: what is it that I expect the past to deliver? There is a crucial understanding which I, for one, still have to explore: what is the desire for history, especially personal history, a desire for? To echo a troublesome question posed by Phillips: what is it about the lost, the absent, the haunting that recruits me so effectively? After all, as Phillips points out, history-writing ‘can be a struggle to hold oneself together’, and I am resisting a commonplace cliché that if you know the past you will not repeat it in the present, which increasingly seems to me to be full of sentimental and misplaced optimism.

Whatever the pulls, the past is never quite as lost as we fear or indeed hope. We all manipulate the narrative to make something more coherent (that is a demand of academic work and we call it being scholarly!) and in so doing rid ourselves of doubt, the incoherence, the leaks and the knowledge of a glimpse that it is not quite like that. We inhabit language, which does not easily embed the truth, as ‘language estranges us from an immediacy we may not be able to bear’ (Mendelsohn 2008). We can be aware of what is lost in the making of a present and a future, while it is true there are tears (as in crying) in things, there are also tears (as in gaps) in things. The attempt to possess the past through making a coherent narrative can be a powerful way of avoiding the ways we are haunted and the elusive enigmas of haunting. To believe in the unconscious, which I do, is to know that we can glimpse so little and know even less and how can we tolerate this when, after all, our business is knowledge. In short, I am preoccupied with how to keep open our understanding, not eradicate doubt or treat the world as an object already understood and known—that for me is an important consequence of being haunted.

Coherent narratives are powerful and have appeal because they allow so much: illusions of control, of knowledge, of power and of unity. As Mendelsohn points out ‘who does not find ways to make the texts we deal with mean what we want them to mean? (Mendelsohn 2008, p. 105). We need to be wary of our willingness to believe a narrative because we want to believe that there is a story as we would rather believe narratives of loss, cruelty, betrayal than actually to confront that there is ‘no narrative at all’ (Mendelsohn 2008, p. 144). After all, to know that ‘life’ is not commensurate is a difficult confrontation. This is a difficult paradox, for to recognise that we need coherent narratives is not to dismiss the crucial insight that history-writing ‘can be a struggle to hold oneself together’ (Phillips 2007), that in the search for coherence we lose openings for different knowledges to occur and the possibilities for different understandings. Perhaps to really allow knowledge of the past with all the gaps, absences, silences and shards is to be overwhelmed, lost and at a loss. So many ghosts along with the living demanding justice, love, recognition and peace.

Perhaps, one possibility of being attached to the past is a recognition of the difficulties of the ‘fleshy immediacy of the present’, to draw on a
wonderful and full phrase of Mark Freeman (2010, p. 272). Living in the present is easier said than done, and each moment within ourselves is affectively and sensually charged: in short, time and emotions are inextricably linked. Time reminds us that for the external world reality is always tied into a time—clock time, deadlines, the time of lines, time running out, instants, sequences and we are driven by clock time and by the demands of the external world.

Yet, the demands of the time of the external world are ‘inadequate to the dynamic of human temporality’ (Freeman 2010, p. 275). For example, the infant does not know time, cries for food and satisfaction but the breast takes its time in coming and in those moments of frustration and disappointment the infant begins, reluctantly, to be introduced to the rhythms of the external world, and the existence of other human beings who have their own tempos of living. As Maud Ellmann states it, the psyche is always out of synch because for Freud realities that matter always strike too early: sex before the infant understands the language of desire, death before the ego is ready to let go of the beloved. Survivals of these premature events lodge themselves in the unconscious, demanding re-enactment in the form of symptoms and phantasmagoria. Because of these precocious shocks, the psyche is condemned to be forever out of synch with daily life, absorbed in the unfinished business of the past. (Ellmann 2005, p. xiii)

If it was not so difficult that our psyches are always out of kilter, there is a certain irony as we are always forced in one-way or another to live in the harsh reality of external time.

In an ironic twist, being haunted by the past avoids the poignant and evocative nature of the present in that we can be so caught up in the past that the present passes us by and our responsibilities evade us as we look backwards. I am at risk here of sailing close to a dominant view ‘of closure’ and of the demand to ‘be in the here and now’, but that is not my intent. I am rather trying to explore how looking backwards can avoid the troublesome matters of the present and the future. Mendelsohn directs our reluctant attention to the following vexed questions: what makes us think, or why would we want to think, that the more we know about people the more we will like them? We know this in our intimate relationships—the difficulties and despair of what we discover and have to live with—which we manage with varying degrees of forbearance and tolerance. The discovery, crucially is not just about what we discover about others, rather what may be troublesome is what we discover about ourselves, which, following Melanie Klein, is not cosy or pleasant. Klein, that most stringent and confrontational of psychoanalysts, pursues relentlessly the aggression, envy, contempt which pulse away in psychic life, wreaking damage and distress and causing vexed relationships with others. As Daniel Mendelsohn points out,
Closeness can lead to emotions other than love. It’s the ones who have been too intimate with you, lived [or loved] in too close quarters, seen too much of your pain or envy, or ... your shame, who, at the crucial moment, can be too easy to cut out, to exile, to expel, to kill off. (2008, p. 130)

There is aggression in the way we eat and wipe out one another and our shame at our complicity cannot and should not lead us to reassuring myths of resistance or indeed that aggression and exploitation, colonisation are all in the past. Rothberg asserts that processes such as amnesia, ignorance and unconscious investment all work to brutalise all involved in this post-colonised, but still, imperialist world that we inhabit (Rothberg 2009, p. 77).

What would have to be relinquished—politically, socially, theoretically, emotionally—if we stop turning back, and become haunted not by the past but rather by our responsibilities to the present and the future? There is a debt that involves laying our ghosts to rest. Justin Edwards explores the idea that being ‘haunted is, in a sense, to be called upon, for the phantom presence returns to collect an unpaid debt’ (Edwards 2008, p. 121). Edwards further argues that while in postcolonial writing this unpaid debt often refers back to imperial dominance, he wants to use the concept of unpaid debt differently to refer to a different type of debt, in which we make good our inheritance (2008, p. 121).

For Freeman there is a moral endeavour to re-think narratives as in that undertaking we can discover that narratives are more capacious and adequate to perceive issues, difficult matters anew (or at least differently). Freeman argues that it is important that we begin discerning and explicating diverse narratives that challenge established reality (Freeman 2010). In addition, as Freeman points out, remembering and narrating ‘can be a vehicle for moral recuperation, that is, a vehicle for correcting the short-sightedness, or even blindness, that frequently befalls present experience’ (Freeman 2010, p. 269). Michael Rothberg, along with Freeman, provides a hopeful account of memory and claims that ‘memory is multidirectional as it is subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and it is, in short, productive (Rothberg 2009, p. 4).

To attempt to make good the past requires a different demand from memory. Ross Poole points out that memory guides our will as it reminds us of a promise that we must fulfil, and to meet that demand we need a memory of the will. Poole argues that what is unsettling about that sense of déjà vu is the hint of moral and emotional failure—that there is something we should have known and have failed to do so (Poole 2009). Freeman asserts strongly that memory can reveal, as memory has a capacity to yield insight and understanding of the sort that could not, indeed that cannot, occur in the immediacy of the present moment (Freeman 2010, p. 272). In addition, as he wryly points out, the fact that memory is mediated does not mean it is irreparably tainted and impure (Freeman 2010, p. 272). Moreover, as
Hoffman argues, within a psychoanalytic frame the ability to re-frame the past and understand it differently if not anew is both a sign of a freedom of the psyche and also an important aspect of maturity.

How do we take account of how we can be haunted by a memory and/or a thought that will not go away, despite our desperate efforts? I am preoccupied with how we can take responsibility for the past and the present in order to orient ourselves to the future, which is one temporality we can do something about. It can be argued that every society has its haunting, its secrets, its underbelly of violent acts and emotions, and there is a responsibility for those of us who inhabit postcolonial societies to speak out and explore from the margins. For as Poole points out, referring to Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved, the ghost Beloved represents a quite unrecoverable loss, for Sethe to take Beloved into her life ‘means the endless sacrifice of the present to the past’ and Sethe poignantly says ‘…we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow’ (Poole 2009, p. 138). Different hauntings, different narratives, different memories, different psychic processes all coalesce and exist simultaneously. We need to bear in mind ‘the awareness of everyone’s vulnerability to the workings of time and decay, the quiet suffering that attends our ordinary condition of mortality, and for which perhaps the only compensation is our tenderness for each other’s vulnerabilities, for what Adam Zagajewski calls ‘the mutilated world’ (cited in Hoffman 2010, p. 414).

Inhabiting Responsibility

We need to focus our attention not just on moving across temporal zones but also on increasing our ability to re-frame the past and understand it differently which for psychoanalytic theory is a feature of maturity. I would add that alongside increasing psychic movement attention needs to paid to who is made absent in narratives. As Ellmann rather wryly points out, Freud, like so many of us, finds it easier to utter the words murder, mourning, melancholia than the word mother (Ellmann 2005). In my preoccupation with my father I have made absent and deleted my mother and to write that narrative is a challenge which up to now I have not been able to tackle. It seems impossible to think through this relationship with its laden murky past, its history of mess, dependency, loss and absence, of depression and struggle that I imagine cannot be told. Above all it is a narrative which cannot be romanticised as it is an ordinary story of the intense struggle between mother and daughter; it is not entertaining, does not have the specialness of the special romance and it is full of the unbearable and simultaneously ordinary mother-daughter struggles.

‘They dream like angels and live like men’ is the epigraph that opens Our Fathers, which is a novel about broken dreams and is full of jagged complexities, it is also about the possibility and necessity of redemption and renewal—‘every wave brought forgiveness to the
shore’ and ‘who can say of a particular sea that it is old? Distilled, by the sun, kneaded by the moon, it is renewed in a year, in a day, or in an hour’ (O’Hagan 2004, p. 2). Ghosts rebuke, they carry moral weight, function as reminders as the past and can come to life to remind us of our responsibilities (Poole 2009, p. 128). Yet, ghosts may not always tell the truth and we do have to consider the possibility that some things are best left concealed (after all, I come from a culture where—if talk is silver, silence is gold—and I suspect every culture has a similar homily). Ghosts are a moral demand from the past and, while they must be given a hearing, we also must sometimes disobey them. There is always the necessary injunction and moral demand that we see life through the eyes of others and of ghosts. But it is also critically important to know that we are not part of a story that we have lived by, that the narrative has done its work and we need to move out of its grip, not as repudiation but as a healthy movement into the present (Hoffman 2010, p. 414).

In *Precarious Lives*, Judith Butler argues that grief is that which will enable a more connected political community and a different body politic, which is redolent with the knowledge of socio-political interdependency. Within Butler’s ethical and political framework—grief is a powerful if not the powerful route to a different engagement (Butler 2004). Grief cannot be dismissed for it is an important route to different ethical and political commitments and simultaneously we need to be careful that we heed LaCapra who is concerned that we do face ‘the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses’ is not foreclosed (LaCapra 2001, p. 240).

We have to live with shadows. Shadows work away within and external to us, they persist; and while we have to recognise their persistence we need to take responsibility for the effects of their presence. They cannot be dismissed because we wish them away. Gordon’s gentle intransigence lies in her persistence in not letting the shadows either get away or have their way. It is perhaps always about love, ambivalent and fraught as it can often be, but responsibility can be, perhaps should be, about following through to different, more engaged socio-political relationships. To engage in such an endeavour requires responsibility and facing up to how we all perpetuate and can be complicit with an exploitative social order, but also recognising the limits of our responsibilities. At the risk of sentimentality, responsibility also requires an engagement with possibility. Freud, in his essay on *Transience* (1915), is concerned with why some human beings cannot see the beauty in life and living; they are caught up in loss and absence so that which is beautiful or awesome passes them by. Despite our jagged and inadequate connections to the past and the present, there is still the possibility that through taking a walk with others and seeing the world through their senses we can then perhaps,

begin to understand our life story, or to tolerate it and ultimately, perhaps, to find it beautiful; not that any life is ever beautiful, but

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the measure of a beautiful life is perhaps one that sees its blemishes, knows they can't be forgiven and, for all that, learns each day to look the other way. (Aciman 2000)

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**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the referees for their encouragement and helpful comments. Especial thanks to Adi Kuntsman and Debra Ferreday for their invitation to speak at the ‘Haunting Futurities’ conference and also for their exemplary editorial skills.

**Notes**

1 See for example the edited collections: *Loss*, (Eng & Kazanjian (eds) 2003), and *Memory: histories, theories and debates*, (Radstone & Schwarz (eds) 2010).

2 *Landscapes of Masculinities: In the Shadow of the Other* will be published by Ashgate in The Feminist Imagination series. The monograph is forthcoming.

3 For careful discussions of father-daughter relations see Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) and the collection edited by Ursula Owen (1983).

4 During June 1967 Israel and Egypt, Jordan and Syria were engaged in what has been termed the Six-Day War. This contentious war ended with a victory for Israel. Another war between Israel and Egypt and Syria occurred during 1973 and it is called either Yom Kippur or the Ramadan War dependent on your socio-political position. Whether the Arab world or Israel achieved ‘victory’ is contentious but in any case the Arab Region felt vindicated following the humiliating defeat of 1967.
References


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