

Black holes, uncanny spaces and radical shifts in awareness

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Abstract: The ‘black hole’ is a signifier that pervades contemporary experience, conveying the ‘gaps’ and ‘voids’ in Western culture and psyche. Depth psychology stemmed from the growing uncanniness of city and psychic spaces during the 19th century. There was an emerging fascination with the ‘dark Thing’—the ‘It’ of many names.

Like a pandemic, depictions of the ‘black hole’ experience have continually emerged in the tragic events and cultural malaise of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Art, philosophy, science, psychoanalysis, literature, and cultural studies have variously articulated this frighteningly potent, yet endlessly elusive signifier. A many-sided, dialogical process best provides acquaintance with such a complex phenomenon. Multiple examples and perspectives, as well a detailed case study, will delineate some of its dimensions. They will show that such ‘black hole’ encounters are not merely negative, but are often the enigmatic source of new awareness and creation.

Key words: black hole, consciousness, discourse, embeddedness, panic, signifier, space, uncanniness

The genealogy of the term ‘black hole’

The term ‘Black Hole’ has become a familiar part of our everyday ‘linguaging’ of things. It apparently originated in the semi-fictional tale of the ‘Black Hole of Calcutta’. In 1756, 150 or so Europeans and others supposedly suffocated when the Nawab of Bengal held them captive in a small room with little ventilation. The expression took root in the collective imagination, evoking a terrifying image of claustrophobia and death.

However, the details of the tale were dubious, and it seems to have been largely an English fantasy. Meetings between cultures often provoke jarring gaps in discourse, along with a sense of the uncanny. A classic example is the terrifying cave in Forster’s (1924) *Passage to India*. The ‘black hole’ signifier seems to have had its modern origins in the shadows of Western civilization, signifying the ‘unknown other’ that allures, and yet threatens when one approaches the limits of the culturally familiar (Said 1978).

In modern astrophysics the Black Hole refers to the phenomenon in which infinite gravitational forces have compressed the mass of a collapsing star into an infinite density. The potent centre of the Black Hole is called a singularity. Black

Holes are only known by their indirect effects on normal stars. In ‘Black Holes’ the laws of physics break down and there is no escape. They seem to stifle new star formation. One could say theoretically that, within this singularity, an entity becomes so densely particular that the usual laws no longer apply. According to the Big Bang model, a singularity is also the point from which the original expansion of the universe began. This phenomenon has provided a rich metaphor for certain troubling psychic states.

The ‘black hole’ as an enigmatic signifier

In contemporary philosophical as well as analytic discourses the ‘black hole’ is used as a signifier for an indescribable ‘nothing’ that, paradoxically, is both the origin of the subject and the immaterial font of creativity and freedom (Daly 2004). Its ‘negativity’ creates a space for renewed consciousness and imagination. ‘Black hole’ conjures other emotionally potent signifiers such as abyss, vortex, void, lack and emptiness. It is a sign that emerges when we are ‘stopped short’ by a failure to ‘language’ experience in our usual language. Appearing in gaps and lacunae in discourse, it may evoke the new events of possible, but as yet unrealized, meaning that we call ‘imagination’ and ‘consciousness’ (Castoriadis 1998, p. 3; Chandler 2003, pp. 74–7; Davis 1989, pp. 8–33). In a similar way, Stanton Marlan (2005, p. 190) describes the Black Sun and the other ‘black spots’ in alchemy as connected to a ‘continuous deconstructive activity . . . necessary for psychological change’.¹

In psychoanalytic discourse, ‘black hole’ imagery has been depicted as pointing towards possibilities for becoming that are not yet represented (Stern 1997), or due to a deficiency of internal self-object relations (Tustin 1990; Green 2001; Hopper 1991; Kinston & Cohen 1986), or ultimately due to the unrepresentable (Barnard 2002, p. 160–81; Dyess 2000; Nobus 1999, p. 171).

The ‘deficiency’ model has many permutations. One of the more common describes ‘holes’ in the psyche that are due to ‘primal repression’ resulting from early trauma. This is different from the ‘secondary’ repression that occurs after psychic structure has developed, leading to the impression of elements as yet unformulated, but relatively accessible. In contrast, ‘Primal repression . . . is the site of catastrophic, unthinkable, past-but-ever-present trauma and associated confusion and terror, hopelessness and loss of self-preservative function; while it can serve as the “frail bud of psychic structure” . . . from which growth occurs’ (Kinston & Cohen 1986, p. 340). All these dimensions often manifest themselves during full analyses (*ibid.*, p. 337).

¹ Marlan appropriately cautions against seeing the alchemical blackness as merely a ‘stage’ in a ‘process of transformation’. When viewed within a system such as alchemy, there is always the danger that the particular experience is subsumed to some ‘larger whole’. Although transformations may occur at the edges of experience, stuckness, chronic paranoia, destruction and death are also real possibilities. There is always real risk.

The evocations of the ‘black hole’ tend to have a spatial significance, but there is no final, essential ‘something’ that they signify. In their various ways, they refer to gaps in experience that cannot be conceived, a lack of ‘somethingness’ (Hauke 2000, pp. 191–222). Therefore they often convey a negation of familiar discourses, accompanied by intense affects and disturbing currents of the uncanny. The sense of terror, loss and grief may open a space for the creation of new signifying elements and an enriched presence in the world (Colman 2006, p. 21; Kristeva 1980, pp. 16–17).

Traumatic and premature exposure to the experience of such ‘black holes’ may cause chronic and severe psychological conditions. One must be aware of the dangers involved in such clinical phenomena. On the other hand, therapies that are mainly ego- and symptom-focused are in danger of cutting off the flow of life. Experiences at the edges of the ‘known’ seem to be at the basis of consciousness and creativity, and intensive suppression or denial of the ‘black hole’ experience in order to treat symptoms may result in ‘throwing out the baby with the bath water’, and result in a way of life that is sterile and contrived.

The ‘black hole’ and embeddedness

Our embeddedness in the sensuous surround of our culture—things such as languages, spaces, social customs, rhythms, rituals, tastes, smells, taboos, economic life, and technologies—comprises an extremely complex, ongoing signifying structure and process that is largely outside of consciousness. It creates us; *it is us*, so to speak (Muller 1996, pp. 1–60; Hurley & Chater 2005). These signifiers vary greatly from time to time and place to place (Howes 2005). We take them for granted, like the air we breathe. Jung once said:

The spirit of an age gains . . . uncanny power. It is . . . a phenomenon of the greatest importance . . . a prejudice so deeply rooted that until we give it proper consideration we cannot even approach the problem of the psyche . . . It is an ethnopsychological problem, and as such cannot be treated in terms of individual consciousness . . .

(Jung 1931, paras. 653–57)

The experience of the ‘black hole’ disrupts this sense of complacent embeddedness. It ‘foments’ an opening that can make the emergence of the human subject possible, along with increased dimensions of freedom and creativity. Neumann mentioned the invariable connection between negation and consciousness (1954, p. 121).

The ‘black hole’ is a floating signifier that can be traced through history and culture, varying greatly in the ways it has been ‘language’d’ (Levy 2006). It involves a cluster of experiences involving acute anxiety and terror that has had many names (Hauke 2000, pp. 211–14; Kjellberg & Ivanhoe 1996, pp. xiii–xx). The impact may be dramatic. A sense of reaching some absolute limit,

chaos, or a terrifying abyss may evoke rapidly shifting experiences of place and space. Terror and anxiety may be intense along with a powerful sense of the uncanny.

These radical changes may create an opening for the appearance of novel elements of meaning 'at the edge of the abyss'. Emerging from this penumbra, things may stand forth more fully in their rich particularity. Encountering the 'black hole' in its various significations can be at the core of shifts in awareness, the creation of new signifying elements, of new images and metaphors, of radical changes of perspective on individual and culture (Castoriadis 1998). Eric Rhode has colourfully described this process as 'Hallucination, Intuition, and the Becoming of O' (Rhode 1998).

A clinical case history

Some years ago an analysand presented several emotion-laden dreams and images that encompassed the black hole, uncanny spaces, and transformation. Because of this person I added the 'black hole' to my psychological vocabulary, and I deeply thank him for that.

Todd was in his middle thirties when he entered analysis due to depression and anxiety. He had recently separated from his wife of several years. From his description, she was a very unstable, probably borderline person. He had previously been in intensive analytical therapy for 3–4 years and described it as 'a waste of time'.

Todd described his family home as 'the mausoleum'.² His mother worked fulltime and was rather cold and unavailable. His father, a butcher, was a severe alcoholic who was often emotionally violent. A rigid veneer of conservative Roman Catholic moralism concealed the psychological realities.

From the beginning he was very anxious and critical of me. As a result, I often found it difficult to be with him. It was as if he 'had no space' for my words or my presence, and that I was 'squeezed out'. He was 'encapsulated' in his defensive terror (Hopper 1991). I was the 'alien other' as well as the secret hope that he dared not consciously entertain.

In our interaction, I referred to this underlying thread of hope in various ways. For instance, I might make some comment about 'the mausoleum' and the connection with his mood of anxiety and despair, and he would say, 'That's

² The motif of the 'mausoleum' certainly reminds one of the 'dead mother'. At the beginning of the analysis, some basic representations of self and other had been achieved, but Todd's life energy remained neither dead nor alive (Green 2001). To give it up is to risk losing all familiar orientation to life, however unsatisfactory such a suspension between 'safe' deadness and terrifying aliveness may have been. New life requires transit of the terror of the 'abyss of unknowing', the 'black hole'. As will be seen, the reservoir of potential life is connected with the father who is despised and very dangerous in the Oedipal sense. Only if the terror is faced and the 'black hole' traversed is there any hope of symbolizing something like the bull-like energy of this father.

no help at all . . . you've told me that stuff before and I feel just the same. I might as well ditch this analysis'.

My responses were generally simple, empathic and observational, such as, 'I know that you are in a lot of pain and feel discouraged, but I also sense a bit of optimism beneath your protests'.

Or, 'You haven't had much reason to trust others in your life, and you need to try me out and see whether I'm trustworthy, and whether I can be of any help'.

After a year or more of constant testing he confided in me in a new way. Gazing intently at me in an almost desperate manner, he burst out with a new revelation. He said he had long been tormented by a 'black hole' 'deep inside' him, and was terrified as to whether this meant that he was psychotic like his wife. There was a slightly 'mad', desperate look in his eyes as he spoke. I sensed a shift that was quite moving at the time, a thread of trust that I had not felt before.

This troubling experience continued as time went on, and I suggested that we sit together with 'It'—the black hole—during some of our sessions. He agreed, and this led to some very intense meetings. Looking shaky and almost desperate, he sometimes angrily blamed me for his pain. At other times he seemed comforted by my presence. Describing the black hole as something inchoate, devouring and horrifying, Todd often felt that he had no ground under his feet, nothing to hold on to, and was falling into an abyss.

Todd would often say, accusingly, 'This crazy stuff is just making me worse! Why in hell should we just sit with it?!'

My responses were along the lines of, 'The black hole is just what's there. It appeared on its own. If we evade it, it will just come back to haunt you. I don't know why it's there or what it is, but I will be with you as we try to understand it'.

Usually such remarks were reassuring to him.

Then he began to have panic reactions during the night. Hardly able to bear the depth of his terror, he thought of suicide as an escape. He called me several times late at night but calmed down pretty quickly when we talked. It was clear that the analytic relationship had become a place of safety and containment. I believe that my implicit and explicit faith in the meaningfulness of his uncanny experience, and my ability to maintain a state of reverie and containment in the face of it, were the most important factors in the evolution of the analysis.

Through endless trials and driven by curiosity about objects around them, children expand their sense of space (Horne 2003). This was what Todd was beginning to do in the analytic process. His growing acceptance of my presence as a helpful 'object' made expansion of space and place a possibility. Now we were both there with 'It'. He was no longer stuck with the 'Thing', all alone.

James Grotstein quoted Tustin to the effect that the 'black hole' is

a universal . . . image in the internal world and seems to represent where the mother used to be, but ripped herself away prematurely, leaving a 'gaping hole'.

Such separation is not only a ‘loss of the object’—the point emphasized in much of the literature—but the experience of being left alone with ‘It’: the Black Hole. It is the gap between the ‘Fort’ and the ‘Da’ (Freud 1961, pp. 7–8).³

This psychological image seems to reflect an ontological—or pre-ontological—condition that is fundamental to human experience, not merely an aspect of psychotic or borderline conditions (Barnard 2002). If endured over time and contained in the analysis, the traumatic impact of such ‘black holes’ can provoke a basic rearrangement of our personal narratives. This enduring gives us an expanded base, though still ‘on the edge of the abyss’, that can allow such changes to occur. A light grasp on the part of the analyst—a kind of non-directive openness, a hovering attention, and a state of reverie—is a necessary condition for the emergence of novel signifying elements.

Jung generally emphasized the transcendent function as the process of enduring ‘the opposites’, thesis and antithesis, with the eventual appearance of a ‘third’, new meaning that is a superior ‘mediatory product’ (Jung 1971, paras. 826–28). In his alchemical writings he often seemed to portray the continual process of change as transcendence (Jung 1970, para. 257). However, he also reiterated his earlier definition of the transcendent function, and referred to the transcendent function as a ‘psychic process of assimilation and integration’ (ibid., para. 261). In the 1958 revision of ‘The transcendent function’ Jung described the ‘third thing’ as ‘a quality of conjoined opposites’ (Jung 1931, para. 189). Assimilation, ‘conjoining’ and integration imply a larger ‘totality’ or image of ‘wholeness’, in which the particulars, or ‘the opposites’, are subsumed.

What I am describing as the ‘black hole’ and ‘transformation’ is a more enigmatic, often disturbing, and sometimes terrifying experience that does not have to do with thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Rather, gaps in discourse provoke a troubling, deeply challenging sense of ‘absent’ meaning or ‘lost’ meaning. In this process of negation, any resultant ‘transformation’ has to do with ‘opening more space’ for the *particulars* of the personal world. The particulars are not subsumed to a ‘superior image of wholeness’ that is created. Rather, in this expanded space, they *can emerge more fully as what they are* ‘in the flesh’, in their *singularity*. This expanded spaciousness allows disparate elements of cultural and personal experience to coexist and flourish, along with novel signifying elements (Rhode 1998, pp. 12–13, 52–64, 209–10).

Such an emergent process is not a synthesis. It is endlessly dialogical: the ongoing ‘heteroglossia’ of life (Bakhtin 1981, pp. 271–75). Giegerich has

³ Fort/da means gone/here. In analytic thought this refers to Freud’s observations of his grandson when his mother had left the room. The child played with a cotton reel whose back and forth movements he could control. As he exerted this control, he said ‘fort’ when the object was at a distance, and ‘da’ when he reeled it in. This originally stimulated Freud to consider aspects of representation and sublimation. The point here, emphasized by many Lacanians, is the gap that exists, a sort of ‘black hole’ during the movement between the ‘fort’ and the ‘da’ (Golan 39, pp. 154, 202, 225).

described a ‘dissolving’ through the process of negation into a more spacious ground or clearing, an expanded interiority in which the particulars of existence may emerge more fully in the form of what they always, already were (2005, pp. 5–8).⁴ Negation—so to speak—removes the cobwebs of unconsciousness so that a new level of reflection and symbolization becomes possible. We can then experience more dimensions of what *is* (ibid, pp. 20–22). This is an ongoing process, not a telos that is ever finally achieved.

A few months after Todd first confided in me about the black hole, he had his initial big dream. Up until this point, his dreams had been sketchy and fragmented. This dream, told to me in an intense emotional burst, was as follows:

I’m in Hong Kong, then on a trip to Red China. It’s a backpacking trip to see the sarcophagus. I’m with some guys. We have to sneak across the border. There are some warning shots and we have to scamper up the hill. Then we cross the desert to an underground passage. We come to a crowded room where the sarcophagus is supposed to be. I see some porcelain and granite bulls with red horns! The bulls pull all my attention rather than the sarcophagus.

I want to take a picture . . . A guy is in there with two bare-breasted women and he tells me to stop looking, that he’s going to kick the shit out of me. I knock him against the wall and break a chair over his head.

We head for the border. There is a gorge with only a plank across it. A rock falls from above toward me. [My buddy] Mike stops it somehow. I feel the presence of my father and am terrified. As I start to walk the plank, a helicopter lands. I know it’s my father because I see his feet. The plank is slanted and I start to slip. Mike helps me. I say I’ll just fall into the gorge and swim, but I really think I’ll die and that’s okay. Then we go across and reach the border. Mike says you have to run 30 yards or more after you cross . . . you can’t just skip across. I see buses crossing the border freely. Guards begin shooting at us. I keep running and running and they keep shooting and shooting. I crawl gasping up an incline, pulling on a railing. We’re suddenly at 40,000 feet! I can look out and see clouds. Mike says to come on. I’m not sure what to do.

He finished telling me this dream with an air of relieved exhaustion as if he had delivered a baby. He expressed amazement that such a creative achievement came from ‘inside’ him.

In the dream the multiple movements in space are striking. First he takes a stand on the earth to make a crossing beyond the known world, at an interface of cultures. To do that you have to sneak, you have to find a new way. The old, conventional approaches won’t work anymore. Then he’s under the ground where he finds the dramatic porcelain bulls, which he chooses over the deadness of the sarcophagus. These animals have an earthy vitality and penetrating red horns, but a cold and brittle porcelain skin. He gazes at the bare-breasted women, perhaps sensing nourishing possibility rather than

⁴ This brings to mind the old Zen aphorism, ‘Before the ass is gone, the horse has already arrived’. Paradoxically, the ass is already the horse, and vice versa (Safran 2006). We do not wait for a resolution of the ‘ass complex’ or a synthesis of ass and horse, but they are already there in their particular ways of being.

lack.⁵ However, there is a problem when he tries to take photos, to make permanent images. It is always a struggle to take such experiences back to the everyday world.

He has left the boundaries of the known, and this had a disorienting effect. As he returns to home base, the experience of space becomes more uncanny and terrifying. He has to cross an abyss. Perhaps this is the unsignifiable that always lurks in the background of experience. He has left the pseudo-safety of the 'dead mother' and this opens up the terror of the 'black hole'.

He can barely glimpse his father. However, this glimpse of him and Todd's capacity to dream it and verbalize it were the beginning of representation of the life energy of the father/bull. The terror involved had to be faced for him to open new spaces, to create room to be. Surrendering to the experience, he confronts his fear and is willing to die. Such a level of surrender seems to be crucial for transformation to occur. Only with the containing support of the transference was such a shift possible.

The spatial shifts emerged like a giant whipsaw. After being down below he must cross a gap, an open space. This constellates a panicky reaction and his sense of place and space shifts violently. He is suddenly high above. It is as if the 'sheltering sky' has itself become a version of the 'black hole'. Mike, the steadfast transference analytic companion, continues to help.⁶ Dimensions of space have radically shifted, through his owning of his life energy that has emerged via his capacity to endure the black hole.

I was as surprised as Todd at the emergence of this dream. It seemed to embody a leap in his capacity for reflection and symbolization. The content was intense and full of conflict, but his affect was one of satisfaction and almost peace.

The dream came up intermittently in subsequent sessions. He continued to be somewhat in awe that such a dream could 'come out of me'. This was a shift in the whole sense of himself as a subject with a 'rich, creative interior'. I supported this more positive sense of self with comments such as 'It's really hard to bring this life back to the everyday world, like in the dream. It may look like it's easy for others, but I don't think there's ever an easy way. It's our job to see that you don't lose connection with the life you found there inside yourself'.

We also explored the specific symbols. I noted that it was the bulls that attracted his attention, not the sarcophagus. They were encased, but seemed full of potential life. The need to fight for his experiences, and to endure the terror of his father, were other foci of attention.

⁵ The bare-breasted women may indicate the beginning of the transformation of the 'dead mother', and his willingness to fight for more life. He has seen the still-encapsulated aliveness of the bulls, and seems to have 'chosen' them over the deadness of the mausoleum sarcophagus.

⁶ 'Mike' could be seen as an emerging capacity for 'object usage' in the transference. I had been fairly active and available in our interactions. This seems to be an important factor in the analysis of such patients (Green 2001, p. 183 & 193; Winnicott 1969).

Often, he would merely smile and nod at what I said, then go on with his own associations. We had developed a wordless trust that often seemed sufficient.

His dreaming self was able to articulate the violent shift into a more spacious world with more room for life. Significantly, the ‘black hole’ did not reappear in pure form during the remainder of the analysis, and his terror and panic subsided. A richer set of possibilities continued to emerge, furnishing a broader base for life. Over the next few months there was a series of dreams with facets that connected with the big dream. He had remarried and his new wife was pregnant. Another dramatic dream expressed this change (dream slightly edited for the sake of brevity):

My wife and I are in downtown Seattle. A friendly dentist is working on my teeth. We leave, and decide to drive our new van around the city. We want to walk around; it would be good for her, since she’s pregnant. A guy takes us on this walking tour. We get to a huge plaza, like in Rome. He says this is a Spanish-Mexican area of town. People are running toward us. It’s a mass of humanity. A guy has a pack of Pall Mall (cigarettes), and points to a mall pictured on the package, like that’s where we’ll be safe.

I get separated from my wife. I realize people are running from the bulls. It’s Pamplona! Something has me from behind. I call to my wife but she can’t do anything. The bull has me but it turns into a person with a cat’s head. It is a tall, sinewy man, very muscular, who is strong and controlling. I want to get free but he says, ‘No, you can’t!’ He takes me to a stage where there are three cauldrons filled with warm, dark fluid. I think he is going to cook me! He has me get into each cauldron so as to put my body scent into each one. There are also herbs and spices that I add.

The reliable dentist works on his teeth, like the focused, hard work of analysis.⁷ Then there is a tour of a mall—the agora—led by a guide. In his company, Todd confronts his psychological agoraphobia, his personal constriction, and his fear of space. The dizzying abysses of space that were evident in the earlier dream were now something to be navigated and explored with transference help.⁸

In the dream, the bulls surge through the streets. They are alive, not fixed in cold porcelain capsules, but also not out of control. The spaces of the city streets contain their powerful movement, and the enigmatic cat-man conducts a ritual. There are vessels in which Todd’s scent will intermingle with the warm waters, in contrast to his past encasement in a cold, rigid shell. He must also include spices! In this dream there is a mood of deep interiorization that is quiet, disciplined, and serious.

Smells permeate boundaries and are part of our most embodied presence. They are often related to shame.⁹ We frequently judge odours to be signs of

⁷ Modifications of teeth are common parts of initiatory rituals, and often have that meaning in dreams.

⁸ Agoraphobic panic emerged in the late nineteenth century as a primal disturbance of spatiality (Hinton in press). Todd’s malady could be seen as part of a more general malady of our times.

⁹ Varieties of shame are often indicators of the level of development of consciousness (Hinton, L. 1998; Mogenson 2000).

danger or pollution and try to conceal the smells that seem to signify abjected parts of self-experience (Kristeva 1982). The socially excluded or disempowered are often said to smell bad. We spend huge amounts of money on perfumes and deodorants. Smells remind us of our body with its vulnerability and death. Hard shells are a sometimes-desperate means of clinging to an illusion of permanence, sameness, and purity that never stinks! To allow these all-too-human taints into the core of awareness represents a basic shift that dramatically contrasts with Todd's initial encapsulation.

He seems to be more grounded, 'in place' in a way that does not require a rigid shell. His raw body smells and the new spices intermingle in their rich particularity. He is more present 'in the flesh', immersed in the smelly richness of life. His space is more fluid and in circulation. The hierarchical encapsulations have radically given way to a flowing, contained sense of openness and possibility.

Some developmental and philosophical perspectives

The 'black hole' first appeared in contemporary analytic discourse when Frances Tustin used the term. Interestingly, she did this *before* the astrophysical entity had been described (Grotstein 1990b, pp. 39–40). During treatment of autistic children she noted a frequent terror of falling into something they referred to as a 'black hole' that was accompanied by a sense of living as a shell-like 'nothing'. Due to their underlying terror, these children 'nullified' anything that seemed 'other' because it could loosen their fragile grip on reality and condemn them to 'falling forever' into an inchoate nothingness. They seemed to feel they had nowhere to go, no safe space for symbolization (Tustin 1990).

Adults create complex, ongoing narratives of words, body language, emotions, images, rituals, and meaningful objects to articulate their worlds. However, these eventually fail to contain affect-laden eruptions (Chandler 2003, p. 2). The experience of the 'black hole' looms when we reach this limitation. Hegel called this point the 'anstoß', referring to an enigmatic 'something' that 'stops us', that defies signification (Žižek 1999, p. 34). We are just there with 'It'. Our psychic space begins to 'turn topsy-turvy', and feels uncanny. This has been described as 'annihilation anxiety' that stems from the threat of madness or psychic death (Gediman 1995, p. 4).

The 'black hole' feels as if it is *too much*, an overwhelming opening in experience that exceeds one's capacity to signify (Merleau-Ponty 1986, p. 21). Awareness of all that we are *not* disrupts the stability of our personal world. This overwhelming 'presence' is the 'other' for which we lack signifiers. It is, perhaps, the ultimately unsignifiable, the unknowable (Nobus 1999, p. 171).

If this experience can be contained and 'suffered through', being 'on the edge of the abyss' may bring forth new signs and symbols. A broadened, more expressive narrative may emerge from the upsurge of primal sensory elements that the 'black hole' can engender. This manifests within a sort of penumbra, a cloud, a 'beam of darkness' (Bion's term)—not 'out in the light' (Rhode 1998,

p. 24). The understanding that this experience generates can be so distinctive that the individual's presence in the world radically shifts.

To feel solidly *in place* in the world involves creating a base in image and language. The process of making meaning through signification, and the creation of narratives, is simultaneously an expansion of spatial experience. The richness of our significations, our ongoing stories, gives 'breadth' and 'depth' to our worlds. This is personal and experiential, not space considered as an objectively-given, measurable substance 'out there'.

The 'black hole' and contemporary art

Anselm Kiefer's work situates the 'black hole' in contemporary cultural history. Something resembling an alchemical Nigredo—perhaps yet another signifier for the 'black hole'—lies at the core of much of his work (López-Pedraza 1996). 'To the Supreme Being' depicts a mass of blackness at the far end of a huge hall reminiscent of Nazi-inspired architecture (Arasse 2001, pp. 66–95). In the place where one would expect to find an altar there are three black panels (Taylor 1992, pp. 301–07). Ironically, the perspectival lines in the painting evoke Leonardo's 'Last Supper' (Steinberg 2002).

In Kiefer's painting, there is no transcendent Last Supper, but only darkness and an overwhelming sense of lack. 'This desertion does not leave in its wake mere absence, nor does it promise the arrival of presence' (Taylor 1992, p. 303). There is 'no Christ and his disciples, no food, and no windows opening onto nature. Only the room itself, where nothing is happening, opens out before us, and we cannot even tell what function the space has been designed to hold . . .' (Gilmour 1990, p. 20). It vividly depicts the uncanniness of the black hole, the sense of void that has so strongly emerged in contemporary culture. The perspectival lines draw us into a vision of blackness that pervades the horizon of the painting, and by implication the tragic events of modern history. This is the contemporary bleakness that we confront in our patients and in ourselves.

Although he never shrinks from blackness, Kiefer has attempted many new syntheses, most often utilizing sources outside the modern tradition. Swathes of 'starlight' appear in some of his later paintings. However, he is constantly wary of any final answers, and has stated that the hallmark of his art is *ambivalence*. For instance, one of his recent paintings depicts the 'Seven Heavenly Palaces', which seems to be a vision of the Divine deriving from the Cabbala. In the following painting he depicts similar 'heavenly dwellings', but now surrounded with menacing fox traps! Such startling paradoxes starkly and somewhat humorously illustrate his determination not to be trapped in reified forms, or in an overly romanticized view of the universe.

Conclusion

It is an endless challenge to be present as persons, without seductive adornments, at a specific time and place in history. Whatever its chains of signification

over the centuries, the ‘black hole’ seems prominent in our own times. Black holes, voids, vortices, and gaps pervade contemporary Western culture. These entities are consistently there in our patients’ everyday experiences, not merely in extreme or ‘borderline’ conditions. If not articulated in culturally creative forms, this reality may well find expression in violent and unforeseeable ways, individually and culturally.

The ‘black hole’ or ‘void’, the no-thing, can open the space for the emergence of new elements. This experience may precipitate trauma and disruption, but also a ‘rearrangement’ or ‘transformation’ of subjectivity as well as cultural creation (Castoriadis 1998). If imaginatively articulated—as we saw with Todd and in a glimpse of the art of Anselm Kiefer—a life with increased dimensionality and consciousness may become possible.

From time to time we always reach the limit of what we can signify, and must face the ‘gaps and abysses’ of life once again. Bearing of ‘not-knowing’ lies at the heart of analytic work at its best, and is a precondition for the emergence of new personal and cultural forms. This paradoxical ‘negative’ reality is the basis of the human subject, with its humble portions of dignity and freedom.

TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

L’expérience du ‘trou noir’ envahit l’expérience contemporaine et véhicule les «brèches» et les «vides» de la culture et de la psyché occidentales. La psychologie des profondeurs émergea de l’étrangeté croissante des espaces urbains et psychiques au cours du 19^e siècle, en même temps qu’une fascination grandissante pour l’ «obscur», «entité» aux nombreuses dénominations.

A l’égal d’une pandémie, l’expérience du «trou noir» n’a cessé de se représenter à travers les événements tragiques et le malaise culturel des vingtième et vingt-et-unième siècles. L’art, la philosophie, la science, la psychanalyse, la littérature et les études culturelles ont articulé sous des formes diverses ce signifiant d’une puissance effrayante et pourtant éternellement insaisissable. Un processus dialogique aux perspectives multiples permet une meilleure connaissance de ce phénomène complexe. Des exemples et des angles d’approche divers, de même qu’une étude de cas détaillée, permettront d’en tracer certains contours. Nous verrons également que de telles rencontres avec le «trou noir» ne sont pas seulement négatives mais qu’elles sont souvent la source énigmatique d’une conscience et d’une créativité nouvelles.

Die Erfahrung des ‘Schwarzen Lochs’ durchdringt die zeitgenössische Erfahrung und vermittelt die ‘Lücken’ und ‘Leeren’ in der westlichen Kultur und Psyche. Die Tiefenpsychologie entstammte aus der wachsenden Unheimlichkeit der städtischen und psychischen Räume des 19. Jahrhunderts. Damals gab es eine aufkeimende Faszination für das ‘dunkle Ding’—das ‘Es’ mit den vielen Namen.

Wie in einer Pandemie entstanden immer wieder Beschreibungen der Erfahrung des ‘Schwarzen Lochs’ in den tragischen Ereignissen und dem kulturellen Unwohlsein des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts. Kunst, Philosophie, Wissenschaft, Psychoanalyse, Literatur

und Kulturwissenschaften haben dieses Furcht erregend mächtige, aber immer schwer fassbare Zeichen unterschiedlich zum Ausdruck gebracht. Ein vielfältiger dialogischer Prozess ist am hilfreichsten, sich mit so einem komplexen Phänomen vertraut zu machen. Mit vielen Beispielen aus unterschiedlichen Blickwinkeln und einer genauen Fallbeschreibung werden einige seiner Dimensionen geschildert. Es wird auch gezeigt, dass Begegnungen mit diesen ‘Schwarzen Löchern’ nicht nur negativ sind, sondern oft die rätselhafte Quelle einer neuen Bewusstheit und Schöpfung.

L’esperienza del ‘buco nero’ pervade l’esperienza attuale e colma le ‘lacune’ e i ‘vuoti’ nella psiche e nella cultura occidentale. La psicologia del profondo scaturisce dal crescere della misteriosità della città e degli spazi psichici durante il 19th secolo. C’era l’emergere di una fascinazione per ‘la Cosa nera’—l’‘Esso’ di molti nomi.

Come una pandemia le rappresentazioni dell’esperienza del ‘buco nero’ sono continuamente emerse negli eventi tragici e nel malessere del Ventesimo e Ventunesimo secolo. L’arte, la filosofia, la scienza, la psicoanalisi, la letteratura e gli studi culturali hanno in vari modi declinato tale significante, spaventosamente potente eppure infinitamente elusivo. Un processo dialogico dai molti aspetti rappresenta il metodo migliore per conoscere tale complesso fenomeno. Alcune delle sue dimensioni verranno delineate attraverso vari esempi e prospettive e con un dettagliato caso clinico. Essi mostreranno anche che gli incontri con tali ‘buchi neri’ non sono solo negativi, ma sono spesso l’enigmatica sorgente di nuova consapevolezza e creatività.

La experiencia del ‘agujero negro’ invade la experiencia contemporánea y trasciende las ‘brechas’ y ‘vacíos’ de la cultura y la psique occidental. La psicología profunda brota del creciente de los secretos espacios psíquicos y ciudadanos durante el siglo XIX. Entonces existía una fascinación emergente con la “Cosa Oscura”—el ‘Eso’ con muchos nombres. Como una pandemia, descripciones de la experiencia del ‘agujero negro’ han surgido constantemente en los trágicos acontecimientos y males culturales de los siglos XX y XXI. Los estudios sobre arte, la filosofía, ciencia, psicoanálisis, literatura y cultura, han articulado en diferentes formas a este potente, atemorizante y sin embargo interminablemente elusivo significante. Un proceso dialógico, con muchos lados, es lo que provee mejores conocimientos de tan complejo fenómeno.

Múltiples ejemplos y perspectivas, así como el estudio detallado de casos, delinearán algunas de estas dimensiones. Ellas también mostrarán que estos encuentros con ‘agujeros negros’ no son solamente negativos, sino que con frecuencia son una fuente enigmática de nuevas concienciaciones y creatividad.

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