Ethnopsychoanalysis, a clinic of borders
From the uncanny to transitional affects

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Psychoanalysis and migration share the quality of being movements towards the other, the unknown and the stranger, thereby originating anxiety. Both of them fit Freud’s (1919) statement that the most upsetting unknown is marked by familiarity, because of the fading boundaries implicated in psychic as well as geographical motions. Psychic primal processes are involved in migration too, through dislocation of the narcissistic contract and catastrophic changes which support the view of migration as a new birth.

In migration experience, affects such as nostalgia, shame, hope, and betrayal can be defined transitional because they involve the whole somato-psychic and relational functioning, and give specific and complex configurations to space and time: though often painful, they possess a structuring potential, and entail a developed and preserved ability to mourn and carry out psychic work.

Two clinical cases of migrating families with adolescent kids illustrate the operation of transitional affects and the psychic sequences of their impossible unfolding. The spatial and temporal components of such affects sustain their mobilizing, transforming and symbolizing potential, that opposes to predominance of repetition, stiffening and sealing of boundaries or space fragmentation when the unbinding functioning prevails.

Keywords: boundaries, migration, otherness, transitional affects, uncanny, unconscious.

Migrating is meeting the other, and the absolute physical, cultural and sensorial strangeness, in terms of places, times and people. Otherness is also the energetic and epistemic kernel of psychoanalytical thought: psychoanalysis, the third great narcissistic wound of mankind, revealed the central and unrecognized role of unconscious as the motor of desire that works independently and in opposition to will and reason. Moreover, in psychoanalysis the unconscious is neither an object, as in previous philosophic conceptualizations, nor a content to be unveiled or found out, but the very process of discovering it. Christiane Lacôte (1998) confers on the unconscious the status of an operational notion: method and object cannot therefore be separated, because it concurrently designates enunciation and actualization. After Freud in The Unconscious (1915) compared the intuition we have of our own unconscious with the intuition of the other people’s conscience, the unconscious took on as its main feature that of representing the other than the self, a reality that we come to know only through experiencing the relationship with the other, that is, through the transference. The heterogeneity between unconscious and consciousness is saved by the mechanism of repression, that, indeed, Freud formulates not only as a defence but, in its primal form, as the creator of such constitutive heterogeneity of human psyche by instituting the unconscious. The otherness of unconscious is furthermore radicalized in Freud’s second topic, where the Id loses its representative essence to become a sheer pulsional expression, the realm of the unlinking and of the struggle to dissolve any excitement.

Psychoanalytic experience shows how often mutually stranger, incommunicable psychic areas may coexist in one individual mind (Amati Mehler et al., 1990). George Devereux, who from his own heterogeneous roots and educational
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paths came to found ethnopsychoanalysis, understood and theorized the central function of anxiety in the encounter with the other, the different from oneself: as an essential precondition of the act of knowledge, anxiety becomes a method for psychoanalytic treatment. The transformation of oneself that results from the impact of the other’s alterity destabilises the somato-psychic subject’s organization that lies on repression of his very strangeness with regard to himself: by means of self-observation, observing the other becomes possible, as well as starting up a mutual transformative process.

The inability to recognise and host the human alterity, both internal and external, led to the huge dehumanisation catastrophes of mankind, from genocides to colonisations. In Africa, between 1880 and 1920, the physical violence of colonisation led to death about half of its population, only to continue for long in less visible forms such as power relationships, moral judgments, and stereotypes: psychiatry became a justifying means of colonial ventures, by translating psychologic, religious and cultural attitudes of the colonised into psychopathologic categories, including social conflicts produced by the erosion of social organisation and by the imposed marginalisation and exploitation of people.

According to Frantz Fanon, in Algeria people lived in a permanent condition of alienation and depersonalisation, ruled by the merciless idea that the adversities of the colonised resulted from their racial and cultural features, in a methodical dehumanisation. The underhand and deep violence of colonial organisation towards colonised people eroded their sense of self and of their own identity through disqualifying their cultural and linguistic fabric: the mother tongue, embedded in early sensorial and affective experiences, was left to private contexts and became socially and politically irrelevant, whereas the dominator’s language was imposed as the only way to make one’s own voice and presence heard in society, and to resume a minimal hope of personal fulfilment, but always at the cost of alienating from roots and internal world. A similar violence is inherent in the relationships between migrants and the new world, a violence that is used both in the individual relationships and through the institutions and policies of recipient countries.

THE UNCANNY, HEART OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Psychoanalysis is deeply consonant with migration movements due to its specific nucleus that is unconscious, hence stranger, unknowable and enigmatic, its topics that highlight trespassing and ruptures of limits, and its logics that comprehend coincidence of opposites and backwards movements in time.

The unconscious has the basic quality of representing the other than the self, that is at the same time the irreducible subject’s nucleus, immersed in a conflict of forces that fades only into the deadly appeasement of death drive tendency to zero. Freud (1919/2018) maintained that the most upsetting unknown is marked by familiarity: the uncanny is something fearsome dating back to what we have known for a long time, hence it is something familiar that draws us back to remote and superseded times, when boundaries between the Ego and both the external world and the unconscious psyche were not yet clearly drawn. The reference to spatial and temporal elements emphasizes the fact that the uncanny feeling results not so much from perception of the unconscious, but from the uncertainty of space and time boundaries wherein we try so hard to contain our identity. How aleatory are such efforts is proved by the fact that, although the process of identity building demands a complex work of disalienation to cut connections with others and stop the unremitting flow of identifications, this cut cannot avoid keeping traces of what should be left off borders, therefore undermining our narcissism. Psychic life itself can only spring from absence, caesura, the negative, thus implying, almost structurally, an uncanny element. The prefix un- that opposes the uncanny (Unheimlich) and the familiar (Heimlich) is the same of the term Unbewusst, hence an index of repression.

Freud writes The Uncanny (1919/2018) during a break from working at Beyond the pleasure principle, that will see the light in 1920. As a result, the essay on the uncanny is
permeated by the unfolding conceptualization of the death drive: we find, indeed, as originating uncanny feelings, the repetition of the same; the blurred distinction between what is animate and inanimate that hints at the tension of death drive to returning to an original inanimate state; the autonomous movements of disconnected body parts as related to the death drive work of unlinking; the omnipotent thinking that blends boundaries between reality and fantasy, as a remnant of animistic psychic functioning; castration as the source of the most severe mutilation anxiety that implies the core of identity; the obscure perception that the other’s uncontrolled forces may hide in ourselves; and the double, with its implications about a part of ourselves that we cannot control and about confusion of what is internal and external.

Freud (1900/1962) drew attention to some of these issues in the everyday life triviality and impersonality, when astonishing and unknown thoughts turned up to his mind, with stranger and, above all, unpleasant qualities: the subject’s oneness and coherence, as well as consistency of his acts and motivations, definitively dissolve and collapse when psychoanalysis arises, allowing space and listening to the impersonal and transpersonal dimensions which we are endlessly acted and thought by. References to the uncanny are scattered throughout Freud’s works, not always with the same meaning or with a clear-cut definition. So Screen Memories (1899/1962) are described as the outcome of a tendentious and late falsification, at the service of repression, of earlier impressions and traces, with unsettling and unpleasant properties. In Jokes and their Relations to the Unconscious (1905/1962) the focus is on a pleasure aroused by recovering something already known that nevertheless elicits amazement and epiphany: wits should reveal something either secret or concealed.

In Rat Man (1909/1962) the patient describes that his infantile sexual wishes of observing feminine nudity made him feel an uncanny feeling, that he relates to something terrible he should prevent occurring, such as his father’s death: the painful affect has superstitious connotations, that we meet again in the paper about The Uncanny. The link between an uncanny feeling and omnipotence of thought, in an animistic context, can be found in Totem and Taboo (1912/1962), while in Taboo of Virginity (1917/1962) an uncanny quality is ascribed to impressions aroused by what is new and unexplained, which in this particular case is the bleeding from feminine genitalia. Known and unknown, in their articulations with what is secret or concealed, are the two opposite ends of a basic ambiguity that originates from dissolution of boundaries.

Freud quotes Schelling saying that the uncanny is everything that should be kept secret, concealed, but has instead surfaced. According to Freud, indeed, the uncanny element is neither new nor foreign: it is, on the contrary, something that has been familiar to the psychic life since very early times, but is then perceived as foreign as a result of the process of repression.

Ambiguity, on the other hand, is the very essence of the word, that is nothing but the main psychoanalytic tool. It is uncanny and dissymmetric in essence, always bearer of different and opposing meanings. In Delusion and dream in Jensens’s Gradiva Freud (1907/1962) outlines an ideal psychoanalytic treatment, centred on the double-meaning word: a discourse that comprehends, in the same words, Norbert’s delusion and Zoe’s interpretation. According to Fédida (2012), through the gaps opened by a double meaning and a double understanding in the discourse between analyst and patient, the infantile sexual phantasy may seep and be unveiled.

The entwine of conceptualisations of death drive and uncanny in the development of Freud’s thinking opens groundbreaking perspectives. While repression had been an active psychic working, set in motion by a psychic instance such as the Ego, and afterwards the Super-ego, that decided which psychic elements should be relegated into the unconscious, the uncanny induces specific affective states upon the Ego and introduces a decentralisation of subjectivity, by positioning alterity to the very heart of the subject. Similarly, death drive, rooted in the body because of its very pulsional nature, drags us, without our knowledge, towards the level zero of
tension, the absence of desire and the inorganic state. While sexual drive makes itself felt by its intemperance, death drive is characterised by its being mute: it works quietly, relentlessly pursuing its unlinking endeavours and, through its disobjectualising function, brings about an alteration and alienation of both internal and external realities.

Just like meanings of *Heimlich* inappreciably blend into those of *Unheimlich*, so an inextricable twine makes life and death interdependent through a linkage of contiguity that Derrida conveyed by the expression *la vie la mort* (Valdrè, 2016): according to Jean Claude Ameisen, the immunologist who systematised the concepts of apoptosis and cell suicide, life is the whole of functions that have the ability to use death: a negation of a negative process. Freud’s followers were confronted with significant changes of patients and forms of suffering: as a result, many basic concepts of psychoanalysis and even its practise underwent important transformations and extensions. A move of our focus has occurred from unconscious representative contents to their containers: in the former instance, the unconscious is viewed as a part of a psychic apparatus that consists of discrete and well-defined psychic instances; in the latter, containers are considered the grounds of psychic organization and functioning, with a limiting but also filtering and elaborating function. Moreover, Kaës supplemented the two Freudian subsequent models of psychic topic with a third one, that includes an intersubjective and group unconscious, therefore ectopic. As a consequence, we deal with a compound subject, who is always one element in pre-existing or coexisting wholes that involve him through their mutual links. The subject, without knowing, is “talked and acted” not only by his singular unconscious, but by the other’s or by the group’s unconscious, in a mixture that ends up with impersonality, while borders are easily crossed both horizontally (trans-personal defences) and vertically (transgenerational transmission).

**THE UNCANNY IN MIGRATION**

Just as the unconscious is a knowledge which is created starting from a new relationship with the other, specifically the transference-countertransference analytic relationship, the encounter with otherness and related uncanny feelings is the core of migration processes: both lead to the opposite and alternating tendencies to integrate and to expel. Therefore, clinical work with migrant families involves the intermingled themes of the other, the unconscious, and the uncanny: they evoke on both sides feelings of being strangers, emotions felt to be all the more lacerating given that they are forever caught up in a melting pot of diverging and incomprehensible, although sometimes all too familiar, realities. Migration entails relinquishing original objects and bonds, as well as the mother tongue, while the concrete and sensorial environment which accompanies daily life and significant moments are lost: surrounding reality cannot anymore be taken for granted, having lost the reassuring quality of obviousness. The individual is therefore drawn back into a dependency marked by frustration, due to the reviving of early feelings of incompetence and helplessness. This troublesome situation results from a deviation, a segmentation, or an interruption of the narcissistic contract, that Piera Aulagnier (1975) conceptualized as a contract enabling the subject to place himself at the spot where the group’s desire for permanence meets the individual’s yearning for immortality. *A displacement of the narcissistic contract*, as in Kaës’s formulation (2005), implies therefore not only a space deformation, but an even more significant time destabilisation, since all these processes involve past, present and future: historicisation as a key element of subjectivation, and the time gap between the Ego and the Ego ideal in the identificatory process.

The stranger represents the new and the unknown, intimately linked to what is felt to be ambiguous and enigmatic in the self: the primordial hate for everything outside the Ego, that Freud described in *Drives and their vicissitudes* (1915/1962), accounts for what Fakhry Davids (2011) conceptualizes as internal racism, a latent paranoid position that can be actualized around a difference between self and other. The host community also suffers the consequences of the immigrant’s arrival, as an
impingement upon the group structure and the pre-existing organisation, as well as a threat to its cultural, linguistic, institutional identity and, generally speaking, to the feeling of shared identity. Both parties experience difficulties of integration in a process of mutual exchange between host and guest, trespasser and trespassed that entails a traumatic potential. According to a Bionian perspective, we could consider this dynamic as a container-contained relationship, where the stranger represents the otherness, the new idea or the “mystic”, which provokes a catastrophic change: the outcome may be either destructive and pathological or evolutionary and creative, both for the individual and the group. The container-contained relationship may suffer a symmetrisation (Matte Blanco, 1988), where the result of tension between conflicting centrifugal and centripetal forces is explosive. If the container’s elaborative function (reverie) were to fail and/or a violent process of mutual projective identification were to occur, the contained, owing to its destructive power, may determine the destruction, collapse, or disintegration of the container itself; the latter, in turn, when excessively rigid or apprehensive, may well suffocate the “contained”, preventing it from evolving or causing its annihilation or evacuation. On the other hand, when the container and contained prove to be sufficiently flexible for the container to be able to accept the contained as is not judged to be destructive, then integration and evolution will ensue, to the advantage of both parties (Bria & Lombardi, 2008). It is what Marie Rose Moro conceptualizes as the process of cultural metissage: migrants’ acculturation meets hosts’ transformation.

Similarly to fractal patterns, we find out the same dynamics repeated inside migrant families: while parents have the task of gradually presenting to the child the new world, felt as strange and uncanny, the child, in turn, who quickly assimilates the new reality, is doomed to embody the stranger and the betrayer, and to become a threat to the continuity of the family world. Filiation and affiliation processes may be either well-tempered or come into conflict, bringing about, even into the family, alienation, expulsion, obliteration of alterity, up to the physical elimination of the subject who has become alien.

**TRANSFERS AND BORDERS**

Movement is at the core of migratory transits, as pointed out by the prefix “trans”, that we meet in many related words such as transfer, translation, transmission, transformation, transport ... They all entail a dynamic quality that suggests opening, novelty, enrichment, as is the case for Winnicott’s concept of transitional: a paradox movement, where something is at the same time inside and outside, me and not me, giving rise to creativity and the spontaneous gesture that identifies each subject among the others. Moving implies borders, so important in the arising of uncanny feelings, but also basic issues in migratory movements, linked to individual and cultural identity, endowed with different properties of permeability, flexibility, transmissibility and sensitivity. Borders may be crossed in either direction and are transition areas or thresholds to pass beyond: they facilitate contact or separation and allow vertical or horizontal cultural transmission.

According to the Grinbergs (1989), the migrant needs a potential space as a transition place and time, between the mother-object country and the new world. This potential space allows a continuity of being and the possibility to overcome, through the work of mourning, the phase of post-traumatic disorganization, with an increase of creative potential. Too often, however, families who consult us present a cumulative trauma in which we are included, whereas the mourning is postponed or frozen and split.

A specific pathology of the function of borders, in their vertical dimension, is transgenerational transmission, that contrasts intergenerational passing down because of its violent quality of imposition and breaking through borders: it forcefully introduces traumatic contents, which ancestors could not transform and think, into descendants’ psyche. Similarly, psychic pain or not-represented elements can be horizontally transferred into the other (couple partner, family member), passing through individual borders. In both cases the subject becomes the unaware bearer.
of experiences, affects, links and vicissitudes that are not his own, but nevertheless weigh and impend on his subjectivity and relationality.

On the other hand, when the safeguard of identity becomes overriding, borders thicken and stiffen into a fixed form, with absolute control of the entry and exit. In place of a processual identity marked by a continuous and dynamic development, made possible by an openness to the new and to otherness, an artificial, well-defined identity is created, that is defended through primary defense mechanisms, such as splitting, denial and reject. This leads to various and different patterns of rage, hate, oppression, imposition, exclusion, persecution, obliteration, devaluation, all in all to dehumanization.

**TRANSITIONAL AFFECTS**

While the most intense forms of affects in migration express the kernel of violence and rupture that is its essence, as a result of poverty, war, domination, colonization, persecution, torture, a balanced permeability of borders is facilitated by some affects or ways of experience that could be described as transitional. They are specifically linked to the experience of uprooting, crossing of borders and bewildering; they are imbued with the ambivalence of positive and negative feelings; they make easier the passage between different spaces and times, and build ties between heterogeneous elements and experiences: among these, there are nostalgia, shame, hope, betrayal, all involving the whole somato-psychic and relational functioning, and giving specific and complex configurations to space and time. Though often painful, their transitional quality lends them a structuring potential, and entails a developed and preserved ability to mourn and to carry out psychic work.

The Eden myth, that represents the first migration of humankind, is the primary intersection point of some of the affects linked to the experience of migration: betrayal, that is embodied in the snake, shame and nostalgia. It is a story of forceful migration and catastrophe of idealization, that give way to shame and discomfort of the other’s gaze with the need to hide, as well as to nostalgic feelings for the lost early condition of beatitude and the absent perception of nothing lacking.

Shame is an inherently boundary affect, that manifests itself at the border between self and not-self, between feeling and sensoriality: the typical skin blushing of the exposed-to-gaze body parts expresses at the same time the upsetting feeling of being naked despite the wish to hide, and the stifled pulsional excitation, in a short circuit of intrapsychic space and intersubjective link, and of narcissistic and object functioning. In migration psychic economy, marked by dislocation or rupture of the narcissistic contract that instates “the place where the I can take place” (Aulagnier, 1975), the affect of shame – more related to the Ego than to the Super-Ego as is the case for guilt – takes on a priority role over guilt: derangement and the related suffering move from the impending criticisms by Super-Ego towards the Ego to a challenging of the identificatory project that lies in the distance between Ego and Ego Ideal, with a substantial implication of time.

**SHAME, BETRAYAL AND NOSTALGIA IN NINA’S FAMILY**

The etnopsychiatric consulting device introduced by Tobie Nathan and subsequently developed by psychoanalysts such as Marie Rose Moro resumes the focus of traditional therapies on containers, bodies, intergenerational bonds and public/private, external/internal boundaries, aiming to affect and restore them. Similarly, the family therapeutic setting is especially sensitive in registering and working on suffering boundaries and specific transitional affects in migrant individuals, families and groups.

In Nina’s family, shame is a key affect that involves all the family members, among whom the adolescent daughter becomes the spokesperson. Nina, thirteen-year-old, is urgently sent to me by a colleague, because of a not clearly motivated insistence by her mother, who asks for an appointment as soon as possible, only to cancel it after a few days: she is unexpectedly leaving with Nina to visit her terminally ill brother, who lives in her faraway country of origin. Apparently, she cannot conceive of separating from her daughter, who will fulfill her own school appointments through internet, so that two bonds will be kept

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at the same time.

In this phone call Mrs P invests me with a highly ambivalent and painful transference, that implies inescapable and unthinkable separations, as well as desperate and inseparable, but also immediate and incorporating ties. This situation brings right away to the table an excruciating awareness of the distance from the world of origins, interwoven with deep death feelings.

After one month I meet Nina, thirteen-year-old, and her parents. Shame is the first to make its entrance in this family drama, when to my question about the reason for their request Nina answers: “I think it is because I acutely suffer from shame”. Her way of expressing herself reveals a doubt: whom does this feeling belong to? To her? To her parents? To the whole family? It looks like she speaks to say she is spoken by someone else. She adds: “with people from my own world”, thus contradicting what her mother had told me by phone, and suggesting a distinction of worlds by different degrees of familiarity/otherness, but only to paradoxically state that she feels more uneasy in her family world – heimlich – that to arouse shame must blend into unheimlich! Moreover, familiarity amounts in her mind to poorly protective boundaries, that allow prying eyes intrusion and indifferenciation.

Mr P interjects: “I cannot see why she should be ashamed: I was shy, too, but this is not shame”. Thus, he positions his daughter within the space-time boundaries of his own projective identifications and of a family history that entrap into an already-known, that is able to screen from the other’s gaze. He needs to deny the stranger’s gaze that can arouse only shame, and to assert his own gaze, that yet cannot see.

The central position that bodies have in this family manifests itself at the end of the first session, when the three of them, in turn, ask for the bathroom: a kind of bodily transference, a need to share with me their primary needs for a reliable relationship to begin among us. In this juncture they introduce me one more family member, a young pookh that expresses all members’ needs for attention, care and shelter, as well as the boundaries issue with all the related conflicts (inclusion vs exclusion, confusion vs loss): all this happens in a space (the doorway) and time (the end of the session) threshold.

The following session, attended by the mother alone rather than the couple as previously agreed, reveals a close intertwining of sexuality, aggression and boundaries in this family. Parental conflicts most often result in changes of night arrangements, with Nina forced to witness the ebb and flow of her parents’ sexual life, to deal with her mother’s suspects of infidelity, and to experience confusion between her own birthday celebration and her parents’ heralded reconciliation.

In Nina’s first individual session, shame, that the father blocked and stated through denial, is abruptly overturned by her: she shows me how her hands, that she used to keep hidden, are damaged by cuticle- and nail-biting. What the father, who conceals, cannot see, Nina offers to my gaze, anticipating my own curiosity. She blames her shame on her too much swinging and easy-going mother, who draws others’ gazes, making Nina feel wounded and naked. Moreover, she reports her father’s opposition to her psychotherapy as a consequence of both his necessity to conceal something and his inability to meet her daughter’s need.

During her short-term psychotherapy, Nina gradually changes into a rebellious adolescent: conflicts between parents are replaced by arguments among her and them, so that generational differences are recovered, and mother and father get closer due to their shared worries for her. The painful feelings of rupture, loss and death, that used to dominate the family experience, acted in the everyday mother’s and daughter’s remarkably long trip from home to work and school, can be dealt with by Nina: she dreams of recovering bonds and habits of her parents’ motherland, that she extensively discloses to me. Nostalgia can begin to signify distance as a motion in space and time that allows to save the bond with the past and to keep alive representations and affective investments with what is lost but not relinquished. In a later session she describes extensively the quinceañera, the magnificent party for girls’ fifteenth birthday, when they enter the adults’ world but are not yet of age: a kind of transitional dimension, where
the first dance is anyhow destined to the father. Ambivalence permeates nostalgia, an affect that lies between mourning and melancholia, but does not harm the relationship to the lost object, either a person, a country, an environment, a feeling, or a culture: a certain amount of pain erotization protects from disinvestment of parts of self and one’s own experience, which would result in amputations and irretrievable losses. In nostalgia, similarly to shame, memories and sensory perceptions play a key role, being rooted in the traces of primal relationships and experiences, from which they spatially and temporally spread throughout the subject’s life. The “work of nostalgia” (Grassi, SPIPEDIA, 2016) makes this affect an instrument of the work postulated by Freud (1896/1962) of relentless reorganization and re-transcription of mnestic traces that make up the unconscious, leading to find out new meanings and expressions for pre-existing psychic contents: it is the creative side of repetition, since nostalgia does not aim at reconstructing a concrete and accomplished situation, but at recovering psychic formations that, whilst belonging to us, are involved in unconscious vicissitudes and are, therefore, imbued with the unknown.

Betrayal, very much present in the dynamics of Nina’s family, brings back to the migrant’s betrayal towards his own origins, but also to the feeling of an unfaithful motherland that denied the conditions for him to stay. Betrayal dramatically unveils the other’s unknowable otherness and one’s own as well: it concerns that living in translation Neergard (2015) wrote about, always in contact with a feeling of self-betrayal and alienation from oneself. Nonetheless, opposing to standstill, safety and predictability, betrayal can open the way for motion and surprise, with a catastrophic transformation from before to after.

VIOLETA AND TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

The whole family enters my office for the first meeting, that Lisa, the mother, requested by phone. On that occasion, she pointed at her seventeen-year-old daughter as the reason for the couple’s request for psychotherapy, due to her accusation against the step-father for sexual abuse. Violeta breaks into this family setting as the one who embodies trauma, violence and excess, and challenges the basic links of the family and its horizontal and vertical boundaries. That’s why I proposed a family setting, as specifically designed to deal with traumatic pathologies and to detect and work upon boundary sufferings, both at a spatial and temporal level.

Violeta appears immediately to be a key element in the family, in its history, myths and links. Although the mother’s request is for a couple psychotherapy, I feel that all the expectation is focused on Violeta, whom she qualifies as problematic. “Last year she ran away from home, so I went to the Police and was told to take her to the police station when she would show up again. So did I: at that time she reported that my husband, who is not her biologic father, seven years before had touched her. Now there is an ongoing judicial proceeding. She is on psychotherapy, but her attendance is erratic. Nobody in the family has been banished.”

After her mother’s inception, Violeta spontaneously steps in: “I don’t know what to think. Maybe I am nuts… but I am convinced it is true...maybe he did it accidentally. Once we were like this (nodding to her step-father and tying up two fingers). I still love him. But sometimes I make a scene, whilst I used to be a quiet person. Yet his answer is always that one, he never caved in. I would not tell if I weren’t sure.”

The father is silent. When urged on, he only tells that everything was fine before. Eventually, he realized he couldn’t believe it.

The younger brother, in disagreement with Violeta, states that he was the first one to be told by her of the abuse: he felt uncertain and doubtful because of the seven years elapsed. Eventually, he realized he couldn’t believe it.

The father is silent. When urged on, he only tells that everything was fine before.

In this immigrant family the daughter’s adolescence violently brings to the fore, as in après coup, all the traumatic experiences that are inherent in migration as well as in the transgenerational flow pertaining both to the
family and to their home country. However, the father’s “before” tells us that this family’s time is torn into a before and an after, which results in the asphyxia of the dynamic time of après coup, as it is stiffened in such static duality. The father’s charge actually dates back seven years, more or less immediately after the family setting in the new country, that followed a long separation of the children from the father and recurring shorter separations from the mother. But in the past there was also a separation from Violeta’s natural father, when Lisa was five-month pregnant: a slap in the face accounted for Lisa’s firm resolution to divorce. The low severity of the alleged facts (a slap and a touching, both occurring once) needs to be matched with the experience of an alcoholic father on the mother’s part, and a father who died when Adrian was coming on age: both are reported as bare facts, without either emotions or thoughts. The violent father was also embodied by the ruthless dictator ruling until recently the home country, now regretted because of the greater safety felt under his regime and better keeping of borders, while now all the family members are scattered all over the world. Moreover, the family boundaries have now been invaded by socio-health services alerted by the police and the court.

Even in the original families there is a remarkable dislocation: the nationality is the same in both families, but they belong to several different language and cultural groups. Among the many languages spoken within this family, the kids chose the Italian, claiming it is easier, despite they came to Italy at eight and six years, respectively. The dislocated narcissistic contract is not the same for all the family members.

Adolescence, as well as migration, implies a reorganization of the narcissistic contract and works as a specific psychic function; both entail an in-between position that, when things go well, is characterized by a transitional quality, with an open and movable boundary, and coexistence of either conflicting or coming and going elements. Nostalgia is an appropriate illustration of this intermediate area, as well as its function of linking past and present, original and adoption countries, filiation and affiliation … In this family the mother is positioned between her husband and her daughter, between the time of Violeta’s report and of the inherent facts, and between different geographical places and languages. However, there is no place for nostalgia, because the very transitional dimension is lacking: the in-between puts irreconcilable alternatives, demanding splits and mutilations of parts of reality and experience. Any vital impulse is restrained in a deadly grip that prevents psychic work and the dealing with otherness and change: both mother and her husband gave up the effort to understand the meaning of Violeta’s late allegation against her step-father and her concomitant alienation from family life: she spends most nights outside home, by people Lisa and Adrian neither know, nor try to get in touch with. She often does not answer her mobile phone, therefore even her mother’s feeble attempts to hear from her come into nothing. Giulian, Violeta’s brother and the couple’s only child, embodies his parents’ expectation of a well-adapted son, who does not arouse thoughts and worries in his conforming to a neutral model of behaviour, that is reasonable both in Italy and in their original country.

All psychic work is in abeyance, as well as memory and expectations, fixed in a frozen and lifeless clinging to concreteness, with the couple fiercely keeping their feet on the ground: maybe it is not by chance that the father works as a floor layer, and the mother as a scrubwoman who, accordingly, cleans floors. Reject and defence against thinking and symbolizing date back to a sequence of traumatic experiences: from the dictatorship in the original country, through the personal experiences in the families of origin with their incumbencies, up to migration and eventually the current family situation. Shame, violence and the imposition of silence result in narcissistic gaps where representation and words are not admitted: this is conveyed to the succeeding generations, as we can see in a dearth of language and phantasy in this family, notwithstanding the plurality of languages spoken in the original families. Significantly, the young generation chooses the Italian as the easiest among all the available languages, in a defensive manic move of adaptation, aimed at obliterating an inadmissible depression rooted in the original world, turned thereby into something
stranger: “over there it is boring”.

As an adolescent, Violeta is undertaking a migration through different life stages, bonds and languages, that prevents her feeling at home either here or there. But the unresolved issues inherent to her family context pushed her to take on the task of expressing, on behalf of all family members, the exile, the abandonment of original bonds, the rupture of social and cultural links, the fading of boundaries, and also the unmetabolizable sexual excess, the traumatic potential, and the prevented integration.

In spite of the court, of social services, of psychologists and so on, this family will probably never succeed in achieving a shared truth, which in fact would need a good enough attitude to psychic work and linking activity.

The father’s silence and the midway stance assumed by the mother, who accepts as both valid and not conflicting the daughter’s charge and the father’s negation, call to mind Bleger’s concept of ambiguity (Bleger, 1967) and the ability to adapt to everything that Amati-Sas described as a basic survival mechanism. Migratory process, encompassing preconditions, project and actualization of the move from one’s own country to a new one, as well as experiences in the new world and more or less successful struggle for integration, steals the migrant his family and social environment with their function of depositaries of primary psychic undifferentiation that remains in all individuals as an agglutinated or ambiguous nucleus. The inescapable need to fix these undifferentiated components of psychic life into an external depositary by means of a symbiotic link makes these situations opposite to the swinging that characterizes Winnicott’s paradox of transitional phenomena. Freud’s uncanny may be positioned at the border between these concepts, since it deals with a psychic apparatus that repression has already differentiated into conscious and unconscious, though it can still temporarily give in to a fading of this separation. Maybe a closer concept to Bleger’s conceptualization is Ferenczi’s introjection of the aggressor, meaning that, when confronted with an aggression from a caretaker or safety provider, the subject tries to take on the other’s view and motivations in order to survive at a basic level of existence, relinquishing his own subjectivity.

FROM UNCANNY TO TRANSITIONALITY

The fact of migration gives us the opportunity to overcome all that we take for granted: meeting the other implies a disorder and ruptures that contact our own otherness, both individual and cultural, demanding a different attitude to listening, observation and transformation. In Freud’s thinking we already find the basilar requirement that there is always something that is kept unknown to the subject: desire in the first topic and defence in the second one, thereby establishing a structural negativity; the work of the negative is therefore the essence of psychic working (Green, 1999). Recent psychoanalytic theorizations, such as Laplanche’s theory of generalized seduction, emphasize the other’s key function in the process of humanization, that requires a sexuated adult to introduce a pulsional nucleus into the instinctive and biologic newborn. Other authors maintain the idea of an ectopic, intersubjective unconscious, making up group and family organizations by means of unconscious links, such as the narcissistic contract (Aulagnier) and the unconscious alliances (Kaës): alterity results both from the plurality of involved subjects and from the nature itself of the unconscious. The uncanny, closely related to Devereux’s anxiety as a method, is the feeling that results from such unintegrable heterogeneity and characterizes the psychoanalytic approach to psychic reality: as a result, different forms of the work of negative lead to repression, negation, denial, up to splitting and reject. Moreover, the recent developments of psychoanalysis, involving a shift of its focus from the representational content of unconscious to defences and containers with their limiting and elaborating function, and from intrapsychic conflict to intersubjective and trans-subjective dynamics and links, show the struggle to deal with the uncertainty and bewilderment aroused by such complexity.

I am emphasizing the role of affects in migration because they are not merely its epiphenomena, but critically impact on re-organization processes and identity paths of
subjects experiencing uprooting and ruptures. Affects are not to be opposed to representational functions as sheer energetic psychic elements, but make up the matrix of symbolization and possess their own logic, as André Green never stopped to claim since Le discours vivant (1973).

In migration the affects are articulated with other issues: motivations to leave and the length of time for coming to a decision; the social and the family group where such experience is shared or the loneliness that has marked it; the different phases of migration (project, journey, arrival, settling, identity re-structuring, inter- and trans-generational repercussions, and so on) as well as different life stages and trials (such as adolescence and pregnancy); the quality of the original family and group bonds, and the ability and chance to create new relationships in the host community; the quality of life in the home country and in the new one.

All the range of affects take part in the migration experience, including persecutory, confusional and depressive anxieties, as well as maniac and omnipotence states, that can inform, on both sides, the encounter between migrant and host; but some of them are specifically close to the feeling of uprooting, crossing borders and being lost, involving thereby boundaries and groups. As a consequence, understanding and care of migration sufferings need a group approach, both in the external reality (ethnopsychiatric device or family setting) and as an internal setting of therapists. It is also the most suitable for the remarkable strength of the involved affects, intensified by trans-generational components and often endowed with a traumatic quality.

A main affect in migration experience is helplessness, linked to a threat of disintegration and boundary confusion, leading to a sharp asymmetric relationship of the migrant with the other-host. Since this condition recalls the infant’s absolute dependence on the mother’s care of its psyche and body, the Grinbergs suggest considering migration as a new birth that, like all vicissitudes of transformation and crisis, may take on either a catastrophic feature, that results in severe and disruptive forms of sufferance, or a depressive quality, that allows the unfolding of elaboration and integration processes, with a creative outcome.

The specifically human temporality of après coup intervenes into the twine between stories, antecedents and narrations, and the involved affects, leading to unpredictable outcomes, either towards development or affective catastrophe. Even when dealing with macroscopic traumata, with the implied disruptive and disorganizing effects, psychoanalysis cannot do without the additional complexity of re-signification processes that follow the time arrow in both directions and the reverberating potential of the original trauma, that goes on acting as an internal, self-traumatic foreign body.

The spatial and temporal transitional component of the affects I described is fundamental to represent their mobilizing, transforming and symbolizing potential, and their ability to contrast the tendency to a time stop through a predominance of repetition, to a fastening of boundaries by stiff ening and sealing them, or to space fragmentation when the unbinding functioning prevails.

Endnotes
1: He studied chemistry and physics, graduated in Malay language and anthropology, was psychoanalyst and a prominent student of ancient Greek history and culture.
2: On the other hand, colonial psychiatry opposed guilt and shame cultures, typifying the latter by a more archaic level of development and a social organization that left a limited space for individual growth and differentiation.

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