Bridging Activism Psychoanalysis and Revolution: Engaging Marginalized Communities Beyond Traditional Therapeutic Barriers

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Introduction

This reflective piece examines whether psychoanalysis can coexist with activism and revolutionary aspirations to reach those alienated by traditional practices. Written in two voices—a psychoanalyst and a revolutionary—it creates a deliberate tension, inviting space for thought. It critiques psychoanalysis's complicity in unspoken assumptions of race, class, cis gendered heteronormativity, and Western capitalism, questioning how the field should be framed today. It starts from the assumption that psychoanalysis has not addressed the legacies of slavery, colonialism and racism and trans phobia.

Not only that, but it asks whether psychoanalysis can adopt activist or revolutionary approaches to expand access, while also interrogating whether psychoanalysis itself offers anything to revolutionary practice beyond academic discourse. It suggests that we need to expand our horizons beyond Europe and engage with South American and other contemporary sites of exclusion and speaking back (*parrhesia*), like trans activism, where people are concerned with issues of access and the political dimensions of suffering. People like Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman's *Toward Psychologies of Liberation* (2008) which bridges depth psychology, liberation theology, critical theory, and community-based practice invite us to radically reimagine our aims and methods by moving beyond individualism and toward collective, emancipatory forms of healing.

Challenging the myth of neutrality, we advocate for a socially responsive psychoanalytic model that integrates activism, social work, community engagement, critical psychology, and public health. This approach aligns with thinkers from the Global South such as Ignacio Martín-Baró, who called for a liberation psychology rooted in the lived realities of the oppressed. Similarly, Silvia M. Dutchevici's Critical Therapy (2022) proposes a transformative framework that empowers clients to recognize and challenge the societal structures shaping their distress. In Power, Resistance and Liberation in Therapy with Survivors of Trauma (2011) and Liberation Practices (2015), Tanaka M. Afuape and Dr. Billy Hughes urge us to interrogate not only our positionality, but also the historical and political construction of therapy itself—asking: what

does this kind of therapy uphold, whose worldview does it serve, and does it reinforce or resist oppression?

To deepen this inquiry, we must examine how intersectionality shapes the psychoanalytic encounter. Bringing it into dialogue with transference, countertransference, and projective identification means acknowledging the personal and political affects of both client and therapist. This requires a framework that accounts for overlapping systems of power—race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and more—that shape experience and can erase subjectivity. Rather than clinging to neutrality, we advocate for an analytic stance that resists marginalization and embraces recognition as both therapeutic and political. In doing so, psychoanalysis may begin to be political rather than engage in complicity.

Our work has involved co-constructing treatment frameworks that fluidly shift between activism and therapy. Over seven years working with sex workers, we trained peer leaders to run crisis helplines, engage in advocacy, and conduct community-based research—efforts that helped establish the African Sex Worker Alliance. Alongside this, we prioritized staff care through reflective groups, healing days, and institutional accountability. Underpinning our practice is a commitment to pragmatism and humility. If a client struggling with addiction seeks analysis, why not collaborate with an addiction service? Why assume psychoanalytic transference is more powerful than addiction—especially when Freud himself did not? If a mother on benefits needs a letter to access financial support, we write it, acknowledging the structural inequalities and lack of cultural capital she faces. When invited to run a therapy group in a brothel, we ensured participants had access to one-on-one therapy *and* the opportunity to join a decriminalization campaign—meeting people where they are, and supporting them in the directions they choose to move.

1. But is it psychoanalysis?

At a Site event in 2023, someone asked: *"But is it psychoanalysis?"* A similar critique arose at a Lacanian seminar in the 1990s, where the work was labelled "applied," not "pure" psychoanalysis. But what is "pure" psychoanalysis? It does not exist in a vacuum. Following Foucault, we argue that psychoanalysis belongs to a continuum of self-inquiry, from Stoic askesis to monastic self-examination to Freud’s Jewish intellectual heritage. Yet, psychoanalysis has disavowed intersectional histories, erasing Asian figures like Girindrasekhar Bose, whose ideas on gender could have expanded Freud’s bisexual theory.

J.A. Miller cautioned against drawing rigid lines between psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, warning of a fortress mentality. Unlike science, the distinction between pure and applied is more complicated. If psychoanalysis retains any "purity," it resides in the unconscious, though

the unconscious itself is never pure. It generates thought through new assemblages, extending beyond the individual to groups and communities, as seen in the work of R.D. Laing, Maria Langer, Franz Fanon, and Bion beyond the traditional consulting room. For instance, in working with ex-political prisoners and torture survivors, the therapeutic frame itself was called into question. Moreover, while some find support through the witnessing of unspeakable violations, not everyone benefits from speaking the unspeakable. Alternative forums—art, music, dance, sport, and communal gatherings—can offer equally vital pathways to healing.

This work can be seen through the lens of applied psychoanalysis or as a form of minor literature—moving nomadically, letting those we worked with lead. Some efforts thrived, others faltered. As Chris Oakley wrote of R.D. Laing, despite his flaws, he embodied a "a desire to be as alive as possible for those of us who are still only half alive" and a "resistance to the stultifying status quo" (2012, p. 178). This spirit of refusal—against institutional rigidity and creative suppression—resonates with Civitarese's critique of the arrogance of psychoanalysis via Kernberg's *Thirty Methods to Destroy the Creativity of Psychoanalytic Candidates* (1996).

Our work, likewise, resists the reductive pathologisation of those living in conditions of social suffering. As Afuape writes, *"To pathologise an individual without understanding the sociopolitical context is to re-enact the violence they have already experienced"* (Afuape, 2011, p. 9). Instead, we align with what Nwoye (2015) calls the task of African Psychology, to "recover from disturbance" by reconstructing images of African ways of knowing and healing that have been distorted. This involves challenging the dominant Eurocentric frameworks that historically "neglect the reality of culture and intersubjectivity" and fail to attend to the "epistemological and ontological foundations" of African thought (Nwoye, 2015, pp. 97–98).

We are inspired by traditions that do not separate healing from the spiritual, communal, or political. Bojuwoye and Edwards (2011) argue that ancestral consciousness, the continued presence of the living-dead, forms a vital part of African attachment systems and therapeutic meaning-making, especially when it comes to mourning practices. Similarly, Madu (2015) proposes a culture-centred psychotherapy that integrates African traditional, Western, and religious healing values, one which is relational, dynamic, and rooted in the lived experiences of diverse African clients. Segalo and Cakata (2017) reinforce this by calling for a psychology practiced in our own languages, one that embraces "epistemic disobedience" and breaks from the colonial notion that only Western knowledge is legitimate.

Our practice is therefore part of a broader liberation project—one that sits in lineage with revolutionary thinkers and healers like Frantz Fanon, Fela Kuti, Miriam Makeba, and Steve Biko, figures who, through poetry, politics, music, and community care, offered radical counter-narratives to the psychic and structural violence of colonialism

2. Psychoanalysis on horseback, with dogs in the session, and seminars held amidst falling bombs

What, if anything, is truly radical about psychoanalysis? While theory is often seen as its pioneering force, perhaps its real transformative potential lies in practice, but is psychoanalysis phobic about grassroots movements, political alliances, and collective action? Can psychoanalysis become a revolutionary force, or will "revolution" remain sidelined in its discourse? More critically, is it theory, practice, or political alliances that can confront the global surge in crude violence, including Anti-Semitism and Transphobia? These questions shape radical psychoanalytic practices, as seen in South America, where, as documented by psychoanalyst Carolina Besoaín, some psychoanalysts actively support trans feminist movements in Chile and offer free public psychoanalysis to those involved in counter-occupation struggles in Brazil.

This reflective piece examines the intersection of activism, revolution, and psychoanalysis, drawing on 45 years of experience with marginalization and violence. All therapy discussed was offered free of charge—an intentional choice by various organizations to ensure accessibility. Yet, during my psychoanalytic training, free therapy was problematized, often seen as a countertransference enactment or a potential obstacle to treatment. However, I observed little to no difference between clients who paid and those who received free analysis. The real challenge lay in co-creating transitional spaces that dismantled barriers—both practical, like unaffordable fees, and theoretical, where psychoanalytic models overlooked the political dimensions, such as class, shaping clients' struggles.

We envision a form of psychoanalysis that adapts to extreme conditions, psychoanalysis on horseback, with dogs in the session, and seminars held amidst falling bombs, offering support to those living under tyranny. Imagine Maria Langer in dialogue with Lara Sheehi, or C. Riley Snorton, Jack Halberstam and Alexis Pauline Gumbs rethinking the psychoanalytic curriculum. We invite you to consider a different vision of psychoanalysis, sparked by anecdotes such as Ferenczi treating shell-shocked soldiers in 1915 and telling Freud about "psychoanalysis on horseback." How when sirens were heard during a psychoanalytic discussion, D.W. Winnicott is alleged to have said, "I should like to point out that there is an air-raid going on"[1].

Reflective writing does not come naturally to us. We draw inspiration from a rich tradition of reflective feminist writing, using it as our model. This approach invites us to speak in different voices, invite new "conceptual personas" (Deleuze and Guattari) and speak from places of

[1] Duncan Harris (2024) notes that there are at least two accounts of this particular incident - one by Phyllis Grosskurth who says that the meeting continued in the basement and one by Margaret Little who says that no one took any notice and the meeting continued as before.

vulnerability, revisiting moments of confusion filled with terror, uncertainty, anger, love, and compassion. For us, turning to psychoanalysis was not the first choice; initially, there was a desire to join the underground revolutionary struggle, but at the same time too frightened to embrace the revolutionary path for fear of imprisonment and torture. Faced with violence both inside and outside the home, the compromise was to try to work therapeutically with those hurt by the violence of apartheid and colonisation.

3. Working under Occupation

Lara Sheehi and Stephen Sheehi's *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine* advocates for a psychoanalysis attuned to the visceral realities of war and colonisation, integrating these experiences into the therapeutic process. Melanie Klein, working with children as bombs fell, revolutionized our understanding of transference and unconscious enactments through play therapy and whilst she is said to have ignored the world outside of phantasy. Can we really say her technique was not shaped by the external world beyond the consulting room?

Winnicott's *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World*, born from wartime broadcasts and later a bestseller, suggests therapeutic practice is inevitably influenced by external forces, like bombs falling on London. Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's *War and Children*, alongside Winnicott's *Children of War* and John Bowlby's research on loss and attachment, reflect on children's experiences during and after the Blitz. Was child psychoanalysis in the UK, then, fundamentally shaped by war's devastation, the evacuation of children, their displacement, and the psychological aftermath of conflict? And if this is the case, how different would psychoanalysis be, if this was as central in the portrayal of their ideas.

The civil war in South Africa shaped the foundations of my psychoanalytic practice. Today, the resurgence of fascism, the devastation of ecological life, and the violent targeting of trans people, especially trans feminine and transfeminine lives, demand a radical rethinking of psychoanalysis. What kind of psychoanalysis can emerge from these ruins? As Hil Malatino observes, trans care is often performed "in the midst of exhaustion," as a relational labor of survival that defies erasure" (Malatino, 2020, p. 8). Jules Gill-Peterson deepens this analysis, arguing that trans misogyny is not just social prejudice but a structuring force of Western modernity, wherein transfeminine life is made to appear impossible in order to preserve cisness as natural and whole. Trans girls, she writes, are "treated as evidence that must be destroyed" to uphold a gender binary violently enforced through medicine, media, and law (Gill-Peterson, 2023, p. 32). If psychoanalysis is to hold relevance amid ecological collapse and the ongoing war

on trans life, it must become a witness, not only to trauma, but to the fugitive, imaginative, and care-full forms of living that persist in defiance of annihilation.

In the 80s, while sitting with a deeply disturbed young man in a Orange, Jewish children's home, on the road to getting a diagnosis of psychosis or borderline, I began reading an introduction to Lacan[2] and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. I began taking him, along with other children, into nature—forests, mountains, and the sea. What might now be called ecotherapy felt then like an escape from institutionalization. Years later, after completing his degree, I ran into him by chance, and he expressed deep gratitude. At the time, the lesson was Winnicott's idea that an object must survive destruction to be real. Now, it's the recognition of how healing emerges at the intersection of individual, group, and community/earth relationships—the *linked self*, as Enrique Pichon Riviere describes it. His bonds extended beyond me to a dog, the bush, the sea, and the micro-connections outside institutional walls—an alternative to medication and psychosis.

In the late 1980s, I worked in a children's home near Crossroads, an informal settlement devoid of public facilities—no toilets, electricity, schools, or medical care. The distance from the Jewish Children's home to Crossroads was a one-hour drive, but in contrast, this 'home' existed in a space of indiscernibility and non-being. As Franz Fanon wrote, "There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region… where an authentic upheaval can be born" (1967, p. 41). My co-facilitator, Patrick Ntisime, and I would always call ahead to ensure it was safe to visit, as Crossroads was essentially a war zone. We aimed to run a group based on Foulkes' ideas. The children drew pictures of burning houses and recounted the gunfire they heard at night. One child narrowly escaped a shooting by hiding under a bed as bullets pierced the windows. I never had the chance to follow up with these children, leaving me haunted by the question: did they survive? Patrick shifted his focus from group work to community development, building essential infrastructure like schools, hospitals, toilets, roads, and electricity. Meanwhile, I transitioned to a crisis therapy center and later pursued training in psychoanalysis.

A key lesson from this experience comes from Foulkes' concept of the group matrix, which represents the underlying structure of communication and relationships within a group, highlighting that the group as a whole is much more than the sum of its individual members. This matrix illustrates how individuals both influence and are influenced by collective dynamics. Importantly, Foulkes expanded his understanding of the matrix to encompass the broader concept of community, viewing it as an integral part of a person's identity rather than just an external social structure. But what happens when the community is at war? At best, our work

[2] I also contacted the author of the Lacanian text, who later became my second analyst.

served as a "witness" to the nightmare of suffering and cruelty, echoing Marion Milner's perspective (1996, p. 275) on dreams.

4. Before the rainbow nation

We offered medical care, alongside both crisis and brief psychotherapy.

Whilst GASA[3] 6010 belonged to Cape Town, as did the two childrens' home, it belonged to another realm, a nocturnal space cloaked in shadows. GASA 6010 operated in secrecy, tucked away in a warehouse, its name a code referencing the service's official title and post box number. With same-sex relationships illegal and punishable by imprisonment, interactions depended on decoding cryptic signals. Abraham and Torok discuss the concept of "crypt" and the process of decoding what is hidden, suggesting that the crypt contains unacknowledged aspects of the self, often related to trauma or loss, which can manifest in various ways in a person's life.

My supervisors, Gordon Isaacs and John Pegge, were central to the founding of GASA 6010, a refuge for those navigating the complexities of coming out and for individuals living and dying with HIV. We offered medical care, crisis intervention, and psychotherapy. John, himself living with HIV, secretly smuggled antiretrovirals into the country and imparted a profound lesson—that some need permission to die, and that life persists until the very last breath. A wild spirit, he defied the odds as many around him perished, yet in the end, he was not claimed by illness but by murder.

Gordon Isaacs, a defiant Social Work Professor and South Africa's first openly gay academic, pioneered crisis therapy and resisted institutional constraints. Despite persecution, his passion remained undiminished, echoing Fela Kuti's "unbowed resistance to the stultifying status quo" (Oakley, 2012, p. 178). Both men embodied what Ranjana Khanna calls *critical melancholia*—a refusal to assimilate, whether to the nation-state or to psychoanalysis and its founding myths. This is "*the unassimilable, which, encrypted, evades integration and entails a process of endless lament. In opposition to Abraham and Torok's therapeutic strategy, which designates melancholy as pathological and attempts to decrypt the buried loss and articulate the unassimilated into narrative, turning loss into ordinary mourning, Khanna holds that the unassimilable must remain as such.*"[4]

[3] GASA stands for Gay Association of South Africa

[4] Phillip Derbyshire, 2004 Limbo in Radical Philosophy. Volume 123 Central Books, London, page 49.

One of my earliest realizations upon arriving in London in 1992 for psychoanalytic training was the pathologization of same-sex relationships and, in some cases, the exclusion of LGBTIQ trainees. My clinical and theoretical work focused on supporting gay men living with HIV, with two clinical and two theoretical papers dedicated to this area. One of these, *To Die of Shame*, explored the intersections of societal violence, homonegativity, and internalized oppression.

What was truly shameful, however, was how my Lacanian supervisor and I, unwittingly colluding, as Guattari might say, with the fascist within the group, framed a dying young person from the Caribbean, who would today be understood as non-binary and trans, as hysterical through a Lacanian lens. Rather than seeing a frightened, confused individual trying to live and express their gender before death, we trapped them in abstract theory, failing to meet them in their pain and fear. Civitarese (2023, p. 15) reminds us that for Bion, the focus must remain on the here and now—on the *emotional experience in the present*, not only of the patient but of the analytic pair as a system. Our failure lay in imposing rigid theoretical frameworks rather than opening ourselves to their suffering at that moment, missing the chance of them finding their way to live and die.

5. Always in the middle

In the late 90s, there was a time when we sat in wet rooms in cold weather shelters and on the streets with homeless individuals who demanded a transversal of our analytic frames if we wanted to engage them in therapy. These homeless individuals took me on a walk which, as Deleuze and Guattari in their Kafka book underline, evidences another law and alternative assemblages. (Deleuze and Guattari, Kalka page 73). We entered doorways, alleyways, corridors, side streets, life in between buildings, always without doors, often filled with smells, incomprehensible and loud noises, bodily fluids such as vomit, urine, faeces, blood…Yet within these states of intensity and delirium human connections took place.

The story began with partnership work in a cold weather shelter in London from December to March (1996-1997). For the first time, a multidisciplinary team, including support workers, a nurse, addiction specialists, and psychoanalytic therapists, were all together in a cold weather shelter. After a week of no one entering the counselling room, I started sitting quietly in the wet room each day, reaching out to people. Gradually, this led to conversations and clients visiting the counselling room—often intoxicated or in emotional distress. Over time, many returned in less intoxicated states to engage in more structured therapy. These encounters could be very intense, became seeds upon which relationships developed. What we didn’t expect was the request to continue the work on the streets after the shelter closed.

Once again, I found myself immersed in the thick of things and sitting in the middle of something, then, now. Now we call it rhizomatic, then I called it analysis on the streets of London. Sometimes people put newspapers on the pavements to sit on, but most of the time you just sit in the middle of things. Always in the middle of things, that is how it began and that is how it ended.

The challenge as a therapist (and team) was to position oneself within this unbound space whilst making oneself emotionally available as well as a witness, often through silence. The aim was non-interference to avoid further impingements. This process was not about trying to fit in or adapt, but to take up an (analytic) position, thus ensuring not a 'fitting in', but rather offering an empty space; the rationale being that without this 'gift of empty space', transitional space would not come into existence. The encounter of "two different rhythms" in which "everything noisy happens at the edge of the crack and would be nothing without it "(Logic of Sense, page 176).

We tried to establish order by creating maps and narratives to produce a sense of chronological time, yet the linear flow of Chronos was constantly interrupted by the timelessness of Aion. While psychoanalysis, as Richard Klein suggests, engages with the 'litter of the letter'—the shadow of the object disrupting our identification—street-based schizoanalysis moves in the reverse direction, dealing with the scattered fragments of lived and unlived experiences of unwritten letters.

We took our bearings on a want to be, an analytic position of enduring not-knowing, striving to learn from experience while offering clients a space to speak freely, without agenda or outcome. People cried, laughed, unearthed forgotten secrets, revisited childhood trauma, love, addiction, and, for some, simply found solace in not dying alone.

This was a stark contrast to traditional psychoanalysis, with its rigid framework of fixed sessions, predetermined roles, and implicit boundaries governing intimacy and support. Therapy on the streets operated on a different pact—a *pact of kindness*. Boundaries remained, shaped by an analytic attitude, or what Lacan termed *want-of-being*. My supervisor, Richard Klein, emphasized ensuring that what I said and did was not based on my jouissance/enjoyment.

Moments of micro-contact formed pacts—part animal, part human. Sometimes this included my dog, whose presence invited touch, becoming a second skin, a container for connection. My other supervisor, Chris Oakley, spoke of *going mad without going mad*, warning against replacing someone's experience with imposed meaning. As he put it, "One is always driven mad—when not allowed to have their own experience, but instead becoming the stage on which the other's play unfolds." Perhaps, then, what appears as madness is a necessary

adaptation—what Oakley calls *self-elected madness*. The homeless camping at the borders, as Edward Said might say, force us to rethink the borders of psychoanalysis itself.

Once upon a time there was a time when, alongside my dog, we approached these homeless individuals on the streets, as I once had in a children's home. The approach of the animal and human, inviting the touch of the wolf, as occurred in Freud's day. Yet we were touched by these individuals and their oral histories and her (stories). One particular individual, considered by many to be a bit of an animal, was Davy. He was somebody I liked, somebody almost everybody liked. A man of intensity, a person of excess. He was Irish, good-looking and playful. One day I said to him, "What is your secret? You are always surrounded by women who seem to be having fun with you?" He replied, "I can dance, I am funny, and I am a bit rough". The question I would like to ask of psychoanalysis, is if it can dance, be funny and is its engagement with what is rough confined to the one to one setting?

This history has been erased, as if it never existed—replaced by law enforcement escorting outreach teams. Was it "time wasted," now "time lost," or, through remembrance and deep connection to suffering, can it become "time rediscovered" (Proust and Signs, p. 56)? Yet, at the same time, time regained arrives as disappointment, for "the fundamental moment of the search of apprenticeship is disappointment" (Proust and Signs, p. 23).

We once mapped our encounters in the cold weather shelters and streets into what Deleuze calls pre-thought (psychoanalytic) concepts. Years later, we attempt to create concepts that help us to liquefy rather than crystallize ambiguity, producing a "time regained" (Proust, p. 56). Concepts like the intersection of one to one, group and community relationships, or Fanons schizoid analysis, that invite the fluid interplay of relationship possibilities. The subject of supposed knowledge dissolves in the wet rooms and delirium of street intoxication—what James Hillman called barefoot therapy. Thinking alongside Guattari, we hope to walk again in the parks and life between buildings—opening psychoanalysis to the doorless frames of a schizoanalysis beyond the consulting room.

6. Working post Occupation

Working post-Occupation, we found ourselves not only in the wake of historical violence but also in a shared interregnum, a temporal and psychic suspension between past struggle and promised liberation. Cowley house was less than a mile away from GASA 6010, yet it spoke to something that was haunting, out of sight, behind bars, across the sea. Cowley House, once a refuge for ex-political prisoners released from Robin Island, became a therapy centre post-apartheid. I joined the Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence and Torture in Cape Town, in 1997, towards the end of the TRC process, working to bridge the gap between treatment and

the needs of ex-political prisoners and refugees. We realized the danger of imposing therapeutic frameworks that felt safe to the therapist but alien to the client. Instead, we co-created spaces through outreach and blended therapy, social work, activism, and community initiatives. We learned that trauma often severs people's ability to articulate their pain, and our work sometimes meant helping them reconstruct their life stories or find resources just to get through the week. The real "diagnosis" was recognizing when survival could no longer be taken for granted, and support had to focus on navigating the present.

Malatino's concepts of *future fatigue*, *temporal drag*, and *near life,* whilst used to the context of transgender experience, captures precisely the atmospheres we encountered: not just trauma, but thick durations where belonging was deferred or fragmented altogether. These were not simply political conditions—they were psychic climates. Refugees, ex-prisoners, and the communities we served often lived in what Malatino might name *timelag*: a zone of suspended futurity where identity flickered, unreconciled with the promises of post-apartheid healing.

Our therapeutic task, then, was not merely to "treat" trauma, but to listen, entranced, as Chris Oakley puts it, in the trance of transference—a reverie of not-yet, not-anymore, not-quite. Like *temporal drag*, these trance-like states pulled backward: into silenced histories, unfinished rituals, orphaned gestures, and spectral attachments. But instead of seeking to propel people "forward" toward normative healing, we co-created spaces that honoured the suspension—what you might call "wake work," or what Campt names the "low-frequency hum" of black life: flickers of memory, moments of warmth, breath, food, music, murmurings of home.

We had learned that in the days of apartheid people were deeply suspicious of Western therapy, but used the struggle itself as a site of therapy. Drawing on rituals from the apartheid struggle—oral narratives, singing, dance, candle lighting and political mobilization—we organized large community gatherings that honoured the dead and ancestors as well as created space for people to speak of their pain. The meetings began with a moment's silence and candle lighting, then a sharing of stories and ended with dancing and singing. In our listening, we took up an analytic position, with occasional interpretations. Some of these individuals entered one to one therapy alongside the large group and community gatherings. We created a newsletter in which members of the groups shared their stories, reaching out to others who could not come to the meetings. This publication of the private, is "the resolution of the conflict between narcissism and social-ism" (Bion 1967, 118).

Though we initially brought South African political prisoners and returning exiles together with refugees from other parts of Africa, they eventually formed separate groups, connecting annually, on International Day for Torture Survivors, to share stories. Our work—integrating

one-on-one, group, and community relationships—challenged conventional psychoanalytic assumptions, particularly the then existing resistance to combining analytic and community-based work and alternative healing practices. It also questioned the prevailing belief that revisiting traumatic experiences is always beneficial, recognizing that for some, it can be more harmful than healing, or merely a countertransferential seduction of the horrific. Instead, we attuned ourselves to different thresholds of engagement—what felt safe for each individual. For many, rebuilding relationships through group participation was key. Others found healing in alternative modalities—art, music, dance, sport, and social gatherings, restoring a sense of connection. And for some, the focus was on protest, mobilization, and the pursuit of reparations and recognition.

Healing often means reaching out, as I did with a man in a darkened shack in Cape Town. Disoriented and moaning, he had never been the same since his father's violent death. A footnote describes what he endured, though some may choose not to read it[5]. I asked him to tell me about his father—not the trauma, but the memories beyond it. Slowly, he recalled the sounds of carpentry, the scent of the workshop, his father's smile, voice, and touch. This re-anchoring to moments of safety and warmth, a safe haven and secure base (Bowlby) allowed something good to coexist with the horror - identification with a bad object. He was no longer just bad, his good internal object had survived being destroyed. After this encounter with him in a dark room in a squatter camp, we moved our sessions to my office, where he read the newspaper and ate a sandwich I made for him. He educated me about Angola's conflict, his first love, family, and the challenges of life in South Africa. We shared laughter, tears, rage, and eventually hope as he began to resume his life.

Our goodbye was bittersweet, as we had grown close. Through this work, we learned how to weave together the fragments of refugee life beyond the confines of that identity, avoiding a singular focus on trauma and horror. Instead, we created a tapestry of what Campt describes as "low-frequency images" that evoke sensory contact, like mealtimes at home or walks with his German lover. He longed for the sound of her voice and the smell of his mother's cooking. These conversations formed a dreamlike space where memories flickered, blending past and present, allowing him to rethread his relationships.

[5] He was haunted by intrusive images of the dead bodies on top of him. He had to play dead as the soldiers were still killing people. This included the experience of his father getting burned. He had a wound and a worm was crawling in it, but he knew not to move. I asked him to describe the sensations, the sounds, the smells of this horror and thereafter asked him to tell me about his father before he died. His father was a carpenter. I asked him to share the smells of the wood shed, the touch of the wood and his father's embrace, the sound of the cutting of the wood and his father's voice. It was this moment of surviving and of bringing good and bad images into contact with each other that enabled us to begin an analysis.

Through this process, we learned the importance of creating space for conversations beyond trauma. His memories of home, walks with his lover, and his mother's cooking formed a montage of sensory images, blending past and present. Creating space for these conversations is something, noted above, that factors in different ways of engaging and thresholds of engagement, hence the importance of different kind of relationship assemblages. This allows us to weave together fragmented pieces of life, giving the ghosts of the past a resting place. The work problematized what we thought was therapeutic.

Our approach to refugee work, particularly with African descendants, can be understood as "wake work." The aim of these assemblages is the creation of a re(fugue), the interval, musical repertories and refrains that stitch those non-representable traumatic imprints. Sharpe (2016) describes wakes as processes that involve reflecting on the dead and our connection to them through rituals. Yet, wakes are also the trails left on water by ships, the disturbances created by bodies moving through water or air, and the turbulent flow left behind (Sharpe 2016: 21). The idea of wake work highlights how the refugee reception centres echo the holds of slave ships—spaces where those who arrive are never truly seen as having arrived (Sharpe 2016: 69). We use "wake work" to describe the vigil-like process we've experienced, both in individual and group settings, of bearing witness to what feels dead, frozen, or discarded. This involves a brother and sister love, the holding, containment of one-to-one, group, and community relationships, creating a network of hospitality and care for those who mentally and physically survive, or don't survive, the trauma of mental and physical colonization in the name of holding centres.

7. Temporal Shimmer

We learned that healing often emerged in a shimmering trance, not in catharsis, but in the dreamlike space where trauma and tenderness touched. It was here, in the psychic folds between horror and hope, that the man from the shack recalled the scent of his father's carpentry. This was not regression. It was *portal work*: porous, performative, and disobedient to linear time. The "rebel flow" of his remembering, his longing for his lover's voice, his mother's cooking, refused resolution, but rethreaded connection. He hovered in a *near-life* state, not fully "recovered," but alive again in texture, scent, and sound.

Guattari's *transversality* slices diagonally through this terrain, just as our assemblage of one-on-one sessions, group rituals, and community gatherings did—uninvited, inviting. We worked across thresholds, crafting temporary containers for grief, anger, joy, and sometimes silence. This was not conventional therapy; it was refuge as re(fugue): repetitions that transformed dissociation into new kinds of association. Singing, dancing, newsletters, political memory—all became refrains stitching together the fragmented rhythm of the present.

In those moments, the work refused the moral imperative to “move on.” Instead, it hovered. It bore witness to lives caught in the drag of the past, suspended in the interregnum of not-yet-freedom. And in that hovering, we glimpsed what Malatino calls *future fatigue*: not merely despair, but a refusal of time’s normative cadence, a resistance to the scripted optimism of progress, to the demand that healing should be forward-moving, linear, final. It was a revolt against chronology itself, against the coercion to recover, to overcome, to arrive.

Within this suspended temporality, this *spiral duration* in the Spinozan and Deleuzian sense, what was most humbling was the way the work returned me to two overlapping moments in my own life. First, to 16 June 1976, when at least 176 were killed by police in Soweto. My father picked me up early from school, his rifle loaded that night, fearing the white community might come under attack. I remember the community fear and how it saturated the air, the breath of what folded into binary white and non-white. Then, just under a decade later, I was conscripted into the navy, forced into military service. I saw the fires in Crossroads. I heard of the killings in Athlone, not far from where I had once been a child. Back then, I had been too afraid to join the struggle. I held my fear quietly, obediently, uncertain what to do with its weight.

Years later, now working as a therapist, I found myself sitting with those who had witnessed loved ones killed in either Soweto and Athlone, listening to the echo of my own history as it was retold to me, this time from the other side. The psychic positions reversed: I was no longer the frightened child, the silenced conscript. I was the one bearing witness to their pain, their grief, their fatigue and in doing so, I had to draw upon another kind of courage. Not the courage to act, but the courage to stay: to stay with the slow time of memory, the murmur of hurt, the trance of return.

These encounters collapsed linear time. They brought past and present into fugue, into vibration. They were not about resolution, but about resonance. And it was in this trembling space—this temporal shimmer—that I came to understand what it means to witness not only others, but oneself, caught in the wake of unfinished histories.

8. Wake Work

A young woman fled East Afrika and became a childminder in Saudi Arabia. There, she was raped and gave birth to a child, who was later taken from her before she was deported. In the U.S., where she sought asylum, the story she most needed to tell, the loss of her child, was not the one the system demanded. Instead, she had to recount the torture and loss of her family under political persecution to meet the evidentiary threshold of trauma that would prove her right to remain.

In therapy, our work was shaped by this legal demand. She had to recall unbearable scenes she had tried to forget, what Saidiya Hartman might describe as being forced into the spectacle of Black suffering. Her pain had to be legible, her trauma documentable, her body a witness. Therapy became a preparation for performance, a re-entry into rooms she had psychologically fled. The courtroom, like the slave market, demanded a body-memory made visible to the state.

Despite this dehumanizing process, her asylum was granted. And with that recognition came a quiet transformation. In the safety of therapy beyond survival, she could finally speak about her faith, her lost child, her small moments of daily relief. At night, she began to dream again, a profound return of a capacity once stolen. Swimming soothed her; church grounded her. She shared in community rituals, brewing coffee with care and listening deeply. Though she rarely spoke in public, she told me how these gatherings gave her strength.

When it came time to part, she once called me her “Afrikan brother.” As a white man tied both to Africa and to the legacy of oppression, it was a recognition that humbled me. It was not mere transference, it was, as Jessica Benjamin describes, a moment of mutual recognition that transcends the roles of victim and helper. A glimpse of something shared. A third space.

This and other encounters reveal the limits of traditional therapy for refugees. Standard models often ignore the political terrain of exile and the communal context of healing. Being open cannot be predefined, it must emerge together, co-created through encounter, humility, and the breaking of old frames. This is the work of “stitching,” reweaving people into their communities, nurturing their spiritual and cultural lives, and offering spaces for shared storytelling and resistance.

Another man, a refugee from East Africa living in a London hostel, felt more imprisoned than ever once he reached supposed safety. Isolated, depressed, and overmedicated, his memories of communal upbringing stood in stark contrast to the loneliness of his room, which echoed past torture. Together, we built a small community inside the hostel. A newsletter, weekly gatherings, and advocacy turned individual despair into collective resilience. The group grew, some came once, others stayed. They sang, cooked, and told their stories, forming a chosen family amid displacement.

Tensions arose, about faith, food, and racism, and anti-Islamism, but through conversation and action, they secured a prayer room and kitchen, and opened the group to others. Black British, Irish, and Caribbean residents joined this Muslim group. Stories overlapped: about the experience of imperialism, addiction, homelessness. From these intersecting narratives, a more horizontal space was created, one where torture survivors and people living with poverty stood alongside one another in mutual recognition and care. The man who once hid in his room became the group’s heart, helping others find their way in.

Not all stories ended with healing. A young unaccompanied minor from North Africa who witnessed the murder and rape of his parents dreamed of visiting Old Trafford. I wanted to take him, but the system said no, paperwork mattered more than dreams. Another girl, not yet eighteen, confided in me her true age, 19, risking deportation. She had been subject to a voodoo ritual involving brutalisation, trafficked, raped, and disbelieved. Her lawyer barely met her and not doctor report was provided evidencing her injury. The judge saw lies. She went into hiding once again, a child forced to navigate a system designed to break rather than protect.

These children, warehoused in group homes rather than foster care, were failed by institutions that prioritized cost-saving and paperwork over care. Staff were temporary. Rights were denied. Paper trails were polished while realities were ignored. Those of us working within the system were also policed, our notes interrogated to ensure the "right" story was told. I left my role feeling complicit, haunted by all that remained unsaid and memories of coming together. The consoling memory I have is that for a brief time I had created community groups, a football team and African youth club who walked along the South Bank, visiting art galleries and other parts of London, far from the London they knew located in council estates in remote settings. I left wondering what kinds of images they would have wanted to display in the art galleries. Another consoling memory was my discovery later that some of the corruption did become known and that a manager was dismissed. But I carry the weight of what I didn't do, the young man I didn't take to Old Trafford, and the system that demanded silence in the name of care. And yet, in moments of ritual, recognition, and community, something sacred was still stitched together—fragile, but real.

9. The Image of Overlapping Circles

I returned to the UK in 2012, trailing the faint scent of salt air and burnt histories. Soon, I found myself once again among the homeless with a shape in mind: a model that interwove.
One-to-one work threaded into group processes, which then flowed into the wider textures of community. When I helped establish a therapy service within SHP, it was never a fixed clinic but a constellation—an ecology of relations. Alongside it, we developed Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) and a reflective practice model: not parallel structures, but overlapping circles, ever folding into one another. The work pulsed across scales—personal, collective, institutional—never neat, always breathing.

Fridays became something else altogether. I would step out of the dense, overheated air of the hostel and into the abstraction of a Deleuze and Guattari reading group. There, language unravelled and reformed, not to explain but to open. It helped in some ironic way to metabolize the institutional intensities I was otherwise too saturated to speak of.

It was there I met Matt. I introduced myself, perhaps too earnestly, as both psychoanalyst and activist. But then came the pause and I admitted: perhaps I was neither. Perhaps the very act of trying to bring them together had obscured something. Matt anticipated this contradiction, spoke of Deleuze's problem—not as an obstacle, but as a shadow cast by solutions already assumed. Problems, he said, are not given; they're invented in the folds of the frameworks we've inherited. By insisting on the separation between activism and analysis, between revolution and reverie, was I protecting something? Preserving the fantasy of purity, the myth of discipline? What kind of problem was I, or psychoanalysis, trying not to face?

Deleuze and Guattari write that concept creation needs mediators—those who pass between, who trouble edges, who open secret doors. I can no longer think psychoanalytically without Matt. He became both sorcerer and revolutionary, a kind of analytic companion who unsettled my categories and offered, instead, shimmering multiplicity. Through our collaboration, the Freudian Spaceship Project was born—a research lab drifting through the question: *Activist, Revolutionary, Psychoanalyst?*

One concept that emerged from our work was a reimagining of Lacan's Borromean knot—not as binding rings, but as overlapping circles, drawn from Marion Milner's dream of interconnection and a strange variant of the autobiographic cure. Here, the circles don't bind—they breathe. They touch, cross, blur, hover. One-to-one sessions echo in group dynamics; collective action loops back into the unconscious; revolution dreams within analysis.

This is not synthesis. It is resonance. A shimmering zone where the circle of activism drifts into the circle of psychoanalysis, not to collapse it, but to make it tremble. To allow the edges to hum with what can't yet be named.

8. Conclusion

A high-profile case, widely covered by *The Guardian*. We began working together under the shadow of surveillance—his phone likely tapped, every word a potential weapon against him. This time, the story wasn't from afar. It was British state brutality.

He was an activist, committed to climate justice. The charges kept shifting, the accusations increasingly absurd. When the more serious claims fell apart, they found something else—he was sentenced on the grounds of "enabling drug use," a charge that barely disguised its true purpose: silencing dissent.

He was framed for his defiance, punished not for what he did, but for what he represented, a challenge to state-sanctioned environmental destruction. His case became a cautionary tale of what happens when you speak too loudly against the structures of power.

In our sessions, on the phone, there was always a third presence in the room, we knew the phone was tapped—watchful, invasive, distorting and corrupting. A presence that shaped the silences and made the line between free association and evidence thin. And yet, within that tight space of state paranoia and control, he still found ways to laugh, to fight, to imagine other futures. Even in captivity, the work of resistance continued.

Ironically, most of our conversations circled not around the human rights violations he had witnessed, brutalisation and torture of activists, police infiltration through pretending to be a lover, but around his love for nature. He spoke with reverence of forests, shared pictures, the clarity of flowers colours, clean river waters deep in the forest, the play between quiet and birdsong. It was this connection, so tender, so embodied, that grounded him. His activism wasn't rage; it was devotion to nature.

As he waited for another recall to prison—again, on some absurd fabrication—he created his own form of "echo therapy." During our phone calls, he would describe the natural world around him, offering soundscapes and sensations, hopeful, a landscape part of his prison notebooks. He gifted me those echoes. What the state tried to contain, he let resound.

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