Amputated Selfhood and Phantom Selves: 
Musings and Reflections on Heretofore Unformulated Experience

Introduction

I spent the first sixteen years of my life secure and comfortable in Iran, never imagining that my own ties to 2500 years of ancestral history would be abruptly severed, along with my psychological connection to this once safe and beloved world. My country was the place where I discovered my sense of orientation in time and place, the smell of sweet Jasmine, the smell of water when it mixed with earth in the backyard of my grandfather’s house, the experience of my first crush, with receiving gestures and words of affection, perceiving suddenly how alphabets can create words, and seeing for the first time the rich hues of sunset. Even now, the remembered sounds of merchants crying out “watermelon! Ripe and delicious watermelon!” can imbue me with sweet nostalgia. But then, when I was sixteen, my family and I were forced to leave all the sweetness of the place of my birth and my childhood.

Now I am able to understand my experience of being ripped away from my mother-country from a perspective that addresses the long-term effects of loss. As I was listening to my friend read a poem he had written about the loss of his wife, I imagined that, as with his loss of his beloved, a chunk of own my life that had been waiting to be played out could never be actualized. My friend and I had a similar experience of a part of our selves being torn and sliced, that the streams of our separate existences, like phantom selves, could continue to feel alive and present only in relation to whom/what we had each lost. A phantom self maintains an area within our larger sense of self filled with the images of what might have been, an area where our actual life with the other is lost forever. I found myself conceptualizing my friend’s and my own
separate and distinct experiences of loss through two metaphors, one the metaphor of amputation, and the other the metaphor of a phantom self.

In 2002, following that insight I experienced listening to my friend, I wrote the first draft of this paper. Having created for myself an image of the long-term effects of traumatic loss, I began my search for a relational home, to use Stolorow’s familiar language, for my own residual feelings of dislocation, displacement, and alienation.

Psychoanalytic literature has not focused sufficiently on the ongoing impact of trauma as it continues to shape the experiences of selfhood, even years after the trauma has ostensibly been mastered, integrated, or healed. Instead, psychoanalytic work has more often concentrated on what is regarded as pathological grief and mourning (Kernberg, 2010). Other than Stolorow’s work on trauma, little is said about the permanent, existential, and phenomenological experience of people suffering from traumatic loss. I believe it is imperative that we understand the ongoing, persistent residue of trauma in our self experience throughout the rest of our lives, which is the subject in this paper.

Our cultural expectations tend to shame those who continue to suffer the effects of loss years after the trauma has occurred. Clinicians, too, want to believe that there is a way to heal trauma quickly, finding it difficult to comprehend how it is that trauma “shatters” the sense of selfhood (Jaenicke, 2008, Stolorow, 2007). I would contend that there is a need to search for a different understanding of traumatic loss, one that addresses and illuminates the ongoing, fluctuating, altering, and mutating experience of selfhood that keeps a person separate from those who have not experienced trauma.

In this paper, using my own experience of exile, I will attempt to conceptualize, through the metaphors of amputation and phantom selfhood how trauma permanently affects selfhood; that
is, I will attempt to capture the long-term phenomenological understanding of traumatic loss. I am hoping that these metaphors will not be perceived as reified or concretized, but instead, will be held "lightly" in the reader's mind.

**Forced Exile and Traumatic Cultural Loss**

The fact that in America, immigrants with green cards are labeled “resident aliens,” is ironic, as this term matches so completely the sense of alienation and estrangement experienced after forced exile. Often people with traumatic loss express a sense of isolation and alienation similar to displaced refugees—as if they truly are “aliens in residence.” It is the traumatized individual’s sense of separation and alienation that creates for her the feeling of a world divided between “the Normals” and “the Traumatized”, to use Stolorow's language. (Stolorow, 2007, p. 15). Often my sense of being a stranger in a strange land has paralleled my patients’ reported experiences of feelings of “foreignness” in their surroundings that began with their traumas. In a new country, all systems of meaning, such as culture, roles, language, nonverbal language, and rituals, are interrupted and altered.

Eva Hoffman (1989) eloquently describes in her autobiography the experience of what is “lost in translation:”

“The words I learn now don’t stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. River in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. River in English is cold—a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation.” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 106).

**My Personal Experience**
Phenomenology, the study of perception, assumes that we are not separate from what we study and observe (Boss, 2006). Who we are, how we think, and what we believe all influence the way we work. Theories are shaped and organized by the theorist’s personal stories and histories, where “the observer is the observed” (Stolorow & Atwood, 1979, p. 17). Since I am proposing a way of thinking about trauma that derives from my own experience of traumatic loss, I will say a bit about my personal story.

It seems like only yesterday that my family and I walked into Tehran airport and saw a few hundred people lying on the floor, hoping to get onto the next plane leaving Iran. In fear of losing their lives, people were fleeing a country soon to become a distant memory. The revolutionary regime executed Jews for the sole purpose of possessing their assets and money (Melamed, 2008). My family and I were afraid for our lives, with so many innocent Jewish families being executed for no reason other than the resurgence of acute anti-Semitism under the cloak of anti-“Zionism”—antagonism to any alliance or affiliation with Israel. Moslem revolutionary guards would show up in a Jewish home in the middle of the night, take an innocent Jew, and later demand that the family pick up the executed body and pay a large fee. This is why, in 1979, at the age of sixteen, I was praying that our passports would be honored, and that we would be able to leave a heretofore beloved country that over recent months had become a frightening and alien place for me.

Upon my arrival in America, I enrolled in 11th grade. I started in the middle of the school year, struggling with a new language about which I knew only enough to hold a rudimentary conversation. My father, a successful physician in Teheran, had to abandon his identity as a doctor and search for a different kind of job in a foreign place. He lost his will to live, and, at a young age, only a few years after his immigration, he died of cancer. Losing friends, my home,
my family’s financial security, and then my father, I was forced to begin a life of self-reinvention and transplantation.

Being passionately in love with Persian literature and language made learning American English particularly painful. As I immersed myself in a different world of language, one whose syntax and laws of grammar followed unfamiliar rules, I experienced a pervasive sense of grief. My native language was also my point of reference, my world of affectivity. Thus, I lost access to a world of affective language, a world of feeling, silenced in my new tongue. I lost chunks of experience in translation because there were no equivalent or similar entities in English into which I could convert them. Writing, once a passion of mine in Farsi, became restrictive and painful. To this day, I mourn the loss of being able to communicate some things that are not transferable or translatable to the new world of meaning I inhabit. Moreover, I had to cut myself off from reading and writing in the Persian language because I felt that I couldn’t continue my ties with a country that rejected my essence. In doing so, I also severed myself phenomenologically from a branch of my former existence.

Ever since my permanent departure from Iran, I have been very grateful to be able to live in a country that has given me so many possibilities and opportunities for growth and transformation. However, I have continued to feel a sense of loss, or a cessation of being, in the core of my selfhood. I feel homesick not just for my country, which I lost to Fundamentalism, but also for the chance to have lived in the continuity and trajectory of my “becoming” and “being in the world.” I have often wondered: What if the revolution of 1979 had not torn me away from my mother country, language, culture and friends, and I still remained living there, in a way that Iran existed pre-revolution? Within my imagined phantom existence I wondered where the trajectory of my development would have taken me. In what direction? Would I have
been turned into a different person than the one I am today? Who would I be then, and what life would I have? I can only know that a branch of my existence in its contextual setting, growing organically from the trunk of my Iranian culture, was cut off as a result of my forced exile. Certain aspects of my selfhood will never come into being. And so I have come to conceptualize my experience of displacement and dislocation as an amputated selfhood.

What I am describing is not equivalent, or even similar, to a feeling of unresolved loss, or of grief not mourned. The kind of amputation I am speaking of is not due to lack of integration of traumatic experiences. What I began to understand and conceptualize as an amputated selfhood is a phenomenon that is created by the left over deposit of trauma: it is not an absence, then, but a permanent residue of trauma located in one’s experience of being in the world.

Hence, it is through my personal experience of exile and my work with patients suffering from similar devastation, that I began to formulate the image of traumatic loss resembling amputation. Traumatic loss, in my view, is like amputation because it cuts off one branch of existence—with all the attendant, unlived life and unrealized possibilities. I also propose that, like physical amputation, psychological amputation leaves people with an experience of a “phantom selfhood” in which they continue to feel the presence of the lost part of their selfhood. In an amputation, the brain does not forget the ghosts of the lost limbs even decades after the trauma (Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1998).

**Traumatic Loss and Amputated Selfhood**

Stolorow describes trauma as "...a catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one’s sense of being-in-the-world" (2007, p. 16). Traumatic loss is defined as a cessation or severance from something, or someone, that is central to the development of selfhood. I am adding my concept of trauma as an amputation that cuts one off from his/her original trajectory
of selfhood and self-experience. The person who has suffered such amputation is left with an
abruptly severed aspect of his/her self-experience, a self-experience that can no longer be lived
out.

More, traumatic loss ruptures and fractures the boundaries of selfhood (Kauffman, 2002).
This sense of amputation following traumatic loss stems from a permanent change in one’s
experience of being in the world because of: “...s major discrepancy between the world that
preceded the loss and the world that now exists” (Parks, 2003, p. 344). Indeed, amputation
permanently severs one’s experience of being in the world because the world in which there is
loss of the significant other is a world that no longer resembles the pre-traumatic world or holds
the possibility of being with the other or in the place that is lost. “This is a sense in which
shared familiarity and a feeling of being at home are subverted by the unfamiliarity, foreignness,
strangeness, and undiscloseable nature of traumatic experience” (Kauffman, 2002, p. 4).

I would like to clarify that the idea of amputated selfhood does not preclude the
possibility that a person who has grieved and integrated his/her loss can fully develop and grow
as an individual. What I propose here is that a person with an irreparable loss has, despite his or
her recovery or integration of loss, been nevertheless deprived of growing in the direction of
his/her prior course of pre-traumatic experience, and, as a result, has had to reconstruct and re-
direct branches of his/her selfhood. Had it not been severed, a branch that had not been
removed from a tree might have generated many more little branches, leaves, and fruit. It is this
severed aspect of selfhood, without possibility of re-growth or redevelopment in the direction of
the pre-traumatic future, that I designate “amputated selfhood.”

Self Continuity
I would like to borrow from Daniel Stern's (1985) description of "core self" (p. 26) to delineate an aspect of selfhood that is impacted by traumatic loss. Stern (1985) divides the sense of core self into self-affectivity, self-agency, self-coherence, and self-continuity. I would like to propose that trauma amputates one's experience of self-continuity in time and place. “One feels continuous even if most of the time the sense of continuity is nowhere in play. But when it is, one re-define the sense of being the same” (Stern, 1985, p. xix). Does an individual with a traumatic loss feel the same after his loss? I do not think so because traumatic loss permanently alters the course of one’s self-history and self-continuity. One cannot exist in his/her original trajectory of self-continuity after the trauma. There are temporal and locational changes to one’s self continuity: “when experiences of loss intrude into a previously coherent self narrative, one's sense of continuity in time is disrupted, and with it the apparent authority of one's previous self-understanding” (Neimeyer et al., in Kauffman, 2002, p. 34).

**Narrative Self**

A 23-year-old patient of mine, who lost her younger brother in a tragic accident reports having lost “a great part of my identity.” Her identity was shaped by her brother's presence in her life, and without him she feels robbed of further growth and development in her experience of who she is in the world: “I will no longer be a sister to a younger brother. I will never be able to celebrate his birthdays. I will never be able to call him and get his unique ways of understanding me that only he could provide, given our shared history and our shared memories. My kids will never get to know him and or be influenced by his great personality... I have lost a part of me that can never be replaced by anyone else...”

In traumatic loss, one's identity is sliced by the loss of the significant other that was responsible for giving that part of self a voice, a narrative. The experience of a narrative self is
affirmed and maintained through responses from significant others; in the same way, one’s identity is “strained and some times sundered by the loss of these significant relationships” (Neimeyer, 2001, p. 266). “It is ironic, perhaps, that the audience for our emerging self-narrative often includes the very person or persons we have lost, as our bond with them is transformed from one based on their physical presence to one predicated on their symbolic participation in our lives” (Klass, 1996, in Neimeyer, 2001, p. 266). “The uncanny shattering of identity in traumatic loss is a loss of the assumption that one exists, and a collapse of valuations that sustain the self, meaningfulness, and the world” (Kaufman, 2002, p. 4).

**Intersubjective Self**

The experience of selfhood is embedded within an intersubjective and relational matrix. Our experiences of selfhood are being shaped and developed through our relationships with our significant others and our environmental surround—all the sensory smells, tastes, sounds, and visual cues that envelop and inform our psyches. In mourning, one is not only losing a relationship that provided and sustained self-experience (Hagman, 2001), but one is also losing all of the familiar environmental and cultural contexts that influenced and imbued the lost relationship. “In loss, all the possibilities-for-being in relationship to a loved one are nullified” (Stolorow, 2007, p. 41). I would like to elaborate on this statement by proposing that it is the cessation of any possibilities of being with the one we lost that becomes experienced as an amputated future. A part of our selfhood and self-experience, or a “sense-in-the-presence–of other” as Stern (1985, p. xxiii) puts it, ceases to exist in relation to the personal other and the shared environmental surround. Hence, the only possibility of playing out aspects of our selfhood in relation to our lost loved one is in a phantom selfhood.
Phantom Selfhood (An Alternate Culture That Keeps The Experience Of A Self Lost In Immigration Intact)

Ironically, after loss, one continues to sense the presence of the phantom, the child, the parent, the spouse, the country, or the presence of feelings and relationships with the grieved phantom selves. Thus, the after-effect of traumatic loss can generate experiences of phantom selves--alternative versions of our selves that can only be experienced in fantasy worlds in relation to the lost others/place. Phantom selfhood becomes a refuge for the thoughts of the person departed or the lost future of the individual.

In describing phantom selfhood, I borrow from Merleau Ponty’s (2003) depiction of phantom limb as a part of a “former present which cannot decide to recede into the past” (p. 99). “The memories called up before the patient induce in him a phantom limb, not as an image in association that summons up another image, but because any memory reopens time lost to us and invites us to recapture the situation evoked” (p. 99). According to Marleau Ponty (2003), a phantom limb allows the individual to preserve and maintain the lost part of us in its original place and cause it to still count in our lives. Since the traditional ways of addressing traumatic loss, by focusing on “seeking closure” or “letting go,” have been replaced by “maintaining symbolic connections” with the deceased (Neimeyer et al. in Kauffman, 2002, p. 37), by finding and recognizing parts of us that refuse to recede into the past we can continue to retain our connections to ourselves in ways that don’t betray who we are and what/whom we have lost.

Phantom selfhood is a healthy response to trauma; it engages the imagination and retains what was lost. A woman I saw who lost her only sibling lives with constant imagination of what it would be like to have her sister alive, the only witness to her abusive life. Had she not died of a rare disease when she was only 20, how would her own experience of selfhood be shaped and
altered by her presence? I understand as well this place of fantastical possibilities where my patient, who lost her son when he was seven, can wonder how he would look now, what college he would be attending, and how her life would be enriched by his constant presence. Ultimately, then, phantom selfhood is a place that entertains other possibilities of selfhood within a pre-traumatic domain of one’s life-trajectory; it imagines what might have unfolded in relation to the lost other. Coincidentally, Dr. George Atwood introduced a new concept -- “the ghosts,” as “possibilities of who we are who we have been, and who we might have become” (Atwood, 2012, p. 177). His concept of ghosts resembles and resonates deeply with my idea of phantom selves, describing the “lost possibilities” (Atwood, 2012, p. 182) of our selfhood that never get to be lived out and be known, because of traumatic severance that separates us from the pre-traumatic life we once inhabited.

Kernberg (2009, p. 603) writes that a person with a traumatic loss experiences an “absent presence” of the significant person he/she has lost. The bereaved is still in a relationship with the loved one who no longer lives. That branch of one’s existence with the loved one does not die in us just because the person has died outside of us. Phantom selfhood provides an imaginative inclusion of what was lost while it is still permitting the unfolding of one’s life in the course of one's developmental trajectory.

I have treated several patients of Jewish Iranian decent who continued to live within their own version of their past, the Iran they left behind before the revolution. These patients speak Farsi predominately, and listen to Persian music. They are married to Iranian spouses and prefer that their children, too, marry within the Iranian tradition. Their immersion in their old cultural heritage serves to preserve and protect parts of their existence that would be lost to them were they to completely acculturate to America; they are thus able to limit the degree to which they
adapt to their new environment so that their old ways are preserved. From my perspective, living in large part within their phantom culture is not inherently a pathological reaction to their severed past. On the contrary, Phantom Iran has helped many Iranian refugees continue to experience themselves along their old self trajectory. The imagined or expected trajectory that was severed by their exile functioned to give them the time they needed to adjust and adapt to a new world, mitigating thereby the trauma of profound environmental and cultural loss they might have otherwise experienced.

**Dissociation vs. Amputation**

I distinguish between dissociation and amputation. In dissociation, the painful affect that is intolerable is dissociated and disavowed and perhaps later, in therapy, is integrated into the experience of one's selfhood. However, the concept of amputated self-experience includes aspects of selfhood that are permanently severed not because the person with traumatic loss cannot integrate and tolerate the painful affect, but because that part of self-experience integral to one's development, has been annihilated before it was ever lived and hence requires for completion a place or mode for its expression, an expression that never before came into experience.

But it's only when one is suffering from phantom pain that a parallel can perhaps be drawn between dissociation and concretization: I have seen patients who have stored in their bodies feelings and self-experiences that had been severed from their sense of selfhood. Often, despite a variety of medical treatments, for example, physical therapy, acupuncture, or hypnotherapy, people with pain, such as reflex sympathetic dystrophy (RSD), are left with no medical cure. I have come to think that some of my patients suffering from a history of chronic and pervasive pain located in their bodies can best be understood by the concept of phantom
pain. That is, their pain, very real and quite severe, can be seen as the symbolic manifestation of that which was severed and extracted from their selfhood. One patient, who suffers from chronic excruciating pain in his hand due to RSD, feels that his hand is a separate part of him, carrying his deepest feelings. Indeed, his hand is an aspect of himself that longs to be seen, heard and cared for. When we together are able to tap into the phantom in his hand, we reduce the intensity of his pain because we are addressing the severed part of his existence wanting and waiting to be made whole.

**Phantomization/Phantom Pre-occupation**

Phantomization is my term for the process by which an individual who has lost a loved one, or has been traumatically displaced, lives solely in an imaginary world of being with the loved one/or within the lost place. That is, when phantom selfhood is totalized, a person can live only as a phantom because such a selfhood is equated with the totality of life as meaningful. In this state the person resides predominantly in his phantom or illusory sphere, to the exclusion of being present in his/her life. This distinction concerns the difference between playing versus concretization. For example, the case of Jessica presented by Daphne Stolorow (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992), contains an account of a woman who felt her deceased brother lived inside of her. When he was alive, Jessica’s brother had been the closest person to her, the only one who had ever made her feel loved and cared for. After his death, Jessica’s parents had insisted (probably outside of their awareness) that Jessica take the place of her deceased brother. In the process of preserving the memories of her brother, in addition to the self state evinced by Jessica concomitant to her parents’ failure to differentiate between the two children, Jessica became convinced that her brother had escaped death and was still alive, living in her body and her being.
Phantomization is the process of being lost in what was lost, just as Jessica was lost in her deceased brother's presence in her. Sometimes it involves someone feeling like his loved one still lives outside of him as he concretizes that loss in an imaginary relationship with the grieved other. Phantomization takes one to a place that is impossible to fulfill, or where it is impossible to continue to grow to one's full potential. This is a pathological process, a tragic, heart breaking phenomenological experience where one’s experience of the world is replaced by a fantasy and illusion.

In the case of immigrant experience, phantomization describes the process that occurs when the person in exile exists in his mind and imagination in that same world he left behind. The world he creates for himself in his new country excludes any other way of relating apart from the one that engages his previous self that he had regretfully left behind.

In Conclusion

I have subtitled this paper “Musings and Reflections on Heretofore Unformulated Experience” because I'm speaking about something inchoate, intangible, that I have been trying for years to put into words, my sense of my own Amputated Selfhood, an experience that I have not only attempted to deal with in myself, but also have seen reflected in the lives of my patients. So, I have attempted to address the long-term impact of traumatic loss, and to analogize it as an amputation of one's own experience of being in the world. In addition, I am proposing that parts of our selves that can no longer go on being in relationship to the grieved significant others are experienced as phantom selves. I conceptualize phantom selfhood as a healthy response to trauma that engages the imagination and holds on to what was lost. But I say it’s a healthy alternative because phantom selfhood provides a relational continuity within our traumatic loss and us.
Using these metaphors permits us to re-conceptualize traumatic loss to broaden our understanding of the long-term effects of grief and mourning without either pathologizing or imposing a designated healing time. Bowlby quotes a widow as saying, “mourning never ends. Only as times goes on, it erupts less frequently” (Bowlby, 1980, p. 101). An amputated selfhood is not an experience that is forgotten, denied, disguised, or distorted. It is a part of an interrupted selfhood, one that can no longer continue to grow and flourish in the hoped-for contextual and intersubjective trajectory. My metaphors of choice, that is, the phantom self and the amputated selfhood, permit greater empathy with the traumatized individual’s experiences. I want to emphasize that trauma is permanent. To pathologize trauma, or to expect trauma to have a limited time frame, creates the risk of retraumatizing our patients (Jaenicke, 2008).

I want to end on a note of optimism that reveals the ambiguity of all experience. Sugar had a sweeter taste in Iran, but had I stayed in Iran I would have known just that one taste. My life would have been robbed of multiplicity. In being transplanted to another place, and in discovering that there are different tastes, and other cultures, my world has expanded. It turns out, then, that the experience of my pain and loss is not only the story of my amputation, but is also the story of my expansion.

Learning Objectives:

- By the end of the presentation the listener will be able to describe what is meant by amputated selfhood and phantom selves.

- By the end of the presentation the listener will be able to identify the concept of traumatic loss as encompassing the experiences of involuntary loss of one’s home.
• By the end of the presentation the listener has to describe what phantomization means and whether the author thinks phantomization is a necessary and healthy byproduct of traumatic loss.

References


