



# Psychoanalytic Dialogues

The International Journal of Relational Perspectives

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/hpsd20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/hpsd20)

## Collective Trauma and Splitting

Kris Yi

To cite this article: Kris Yi (2024) Collective Trauma and Splitting, Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 34:2, 162-163, DOI: [10.1080/10481885.2024.2325918](https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2024.2325918)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2024.2325918>



Published online: 22 Apr 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 144



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Collective Trauma and Splitting

During the pandemic, my teenage daughter became a fan of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In the spirit of camaraderie, I watched many Marvel movies with her. While the numerous characters and the plot lines of the movies are all a blur now, I still remember clearly the broadly sweeping theme characterizing them all – the triumph of good over evil. This division of the fantasy universe into good vs. evil would be less troubling if it did not reflect a *real life* division in our society and in our psychoanalytic organizations. Each side carries conviction that it is aligned with the good and that the other side is evil. It is easy to see the good vs. evil split in movies as simplistic; it is harder to discern that we are mired in this splitting ourselves.

An example is my reaction to the racism debate raging within psychoanalysis. I feel, within me, an impulse to vilify the other side: As a Korean American, I feel incensed by the old guard voices upholding a white-centric worldview. I feel disgust at them – greedy, self-serving people who are too cowardly to face up to the way structural racism benefits them. My contempt is even more pronounced toward Donald Trump and his supporters. In Donald Trump's profoundly destructive sociopathy, I find justification for vilifying him and his supporters.

I might be smug with my own splitting, if it were not for one major complication – its consequence can be deadly. In graduate school I watched a short film about the human toll caused by the atomic bombs dropped in Japan during WWII. I felt curiously unmoved. I had a similar reaction some years later when the movie *Hiroshima, mon amour* was screened at a local analytic institute. I felt little empathy toward the destruction the bomb wrought to Hiroshima or its citizens. In both situations, I was surprised by my reaction, because I had a love of Japanese culture and cherished the experience of living in Japan as a college exchange student.

Over the years I thought about my reaction. The movies activated a dissociated state within me of historical trauma from Japan's colonization of Korea. Korea was one of the earliest victims of Japan's imperial ambitions that paralleled those of its European counterparts. When I was growing up in the 60's and 70's in Korea, our experiences under Japanese colonial rule were very much alive in the collective Korean consciousness. They were prominently featured in Korean textbooks and public discourse. I still have vivid memories of the TV shows and movies depicting the violent brutality – rape, torture, killings, systematic annihilation of Korean language and culture, etc – with which Japanese overlords ruled Korea. Even as these portrayals did not reflect my personal experience, as I was not yet born during the occupation, I was still absorbing the trauma of the colonization, so palpably present in the fabric of Korean life. In this trauma state, Japan existed simply as evil and as a result the singular significance the atomic bombs held for me was that they ended that evil. In this state, I could not afford the nuance of the distinction between the Japanese civilians perishing in the bombing and the Japanese official policy and its henchmen occupying Korea.

In light of the recent humanitarian crisis in Gaza, I think again about the relationship between collective trauma and splitting. A patient of mine, an Israeli-American college student, was very shaken by the Hamas attack in Israel and the subsequent pro-Palestinian protests on her school campus. They left her feeling unsafe in the world that was against her and Israel. Her attention narrowed onto Israel's survival as the equally horrifying suffering of Palestinians is left out of her experiential horizon. This dissociative splitting is happening on a large scale by the Israeli population rallying behind its government's deadly policies of indiscriminate bombings, where no distinction between Hamas and civilians is made.

The most parsimonious explanation for the splitting seen in Gaza and other places around the world, including the US, is offered by trauma studies and Vamik Volkan's work on large-group identity. They tell us that when a large group experiences massive traumas at the hands of the other, it becomes hyper-focused on that threat, pushing humanity of the other group to the periphery of its collective experiential awareness. This dissociative splitting of victim/good us vs. persecutory/evil others is designed to maximize survival. It then becomes transmitted intergenerationally, turning into hardened group identities. Recognizing it, understanding it, and healing from it is a task that faces all of us, as members of the human community.

Kris Yi, Ph.D. Psy.D.  
*Pasadena, California, USA*

Copyright © 2024 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2024.2325918>

