

The cultural complex and the environment: an Australian case study

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We are a new people on an antique continent, and we must do a lot more thinking and observing before we can piece this language together into the similes and metaphors which bring deeper understanding¹. JOHN OLSEN, 1984

“Each migration together with its ‘why’ and ‘wherefore’ is inscribed in the history of the family and the individual”. (Grinberg and Grinberg, p. ix)²

Introduction

This paper and the larger one from which it comes arose out of my encounter with the Australian land. As David Abrams put it in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, “Some sensible presence ‘beckoned to me’, ‘set a problem for my body to solve’, ‘responded to me’, ‘took possession of my senses’ and even ‘thinks [thought] itself in me’³.”

As a migrant to Australia I was almost immediately presented with an experience of an unsettling unknown absence and an unquiet unfamiliar presence, the simultaneity of which generated what Gelder and Jacobs in their book *Uncanny Australia*⁴ have called the anxiety of the uncanny. This is best described as an experience of being both **in place** and **out of place** at the same time. As if one’s home has somehow been rendered foreign. It can generate a state of mind akin to feelings of alienation.

It left me with the cultural task of redefining my own relationship with the country of my birth, England, the country I had moved to, Australia, and with ‘country’ itself – which, in an Australian context, has meant redefining ‘self’. And this, I now think, has transformed what had been my Western internal border between Culture and Nature into a semi-permeable membrane.

My own experience as a migrant and migrant analyst working with both Australian born and non Australian born patients has revealed to me something of the profound interrelatedness between the internal landscapes of mind and memory - the land or substrate within - and the external land. I would like to briefly sketch out for you this afternoon something of that link and why I think that this impacts directly upon attitudes to the land and its

¹Deborah Hart, *John Olsen*, Craftsman House, NSW, 1991, p.151

²L. and R. Grinberg, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile*, Yale Univ., Yale, 1989, p.ix

³David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Vintage, NY, 1996, p.xx.

⁴K. Gelder and J. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, Melb. Univ. Press, Melb., 1998

use and misuse specifically in those countries like Australia, and perhaps the US, which have experienced a catastrophic collision between indigenous and colonising cultures. That is, between two radically different minds or modes of perception and thinking.

In 1968, the Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner referred to a *force of historical forgetting* which he called the Great Australian Silence. I have found, as have others, that although things have changed since the 1960s, there is still a potent psychological destructive force of forgetting which affects and infects psychic relations in Australia which I feel has something to do with the disavowal of the originating trauma of dislocation (which marks the beginning of a non-indigenous sense of identity) and the consequent denial of the reality that it is we, whites, who are the foreigners. I have found that the experience of contemporary migrants resonates with and can illuminate something of the emotional experience of traumatic 'first contact' experiences – something that contemporary writers of literature and history are also finding their way into, eg. Clendinnen, Grenville, Keneally. I would say that the shock waves of those first states of 'arrival' continue to ripple through the psychosomatic terrain of land and people alike disturbing both non conscious 'taken-for-granted' fundamental patterns and conscious belief systems. This has created a great deal of anxiety and states of 'unsettlement' in the non-indigenous community which, ironically, identifies itself as a 'settler' nation. It has also, of course, resulted in catastrophe for the indigenous community and often destructive attitudes to land.

There are 5 foundational and organising ideas:

- (1) The experience of migration presents a profound challenge to the containing mind of the migrant – the mindskin we might say – constellating regressive and primitive fears and anxieties to do with experiences of psychic rupture and loss.
- (2) The migrant brings with them an internal and culturally and individually specific organising pattern below the threshold of consciousness – a taken-for-granted.
- (3) The receiving environment – both people and land – have their own internal and, in the case of Australian indigenous people, also externally specific organising patterns of mind – taken-for-granted.
- (4) According to Wilfred Bion, when 2 organising patterns of mind encounter one another, the result is catastrophic change – i.e. structural or transformational change - responded to idiosyncratically. Narcissistic and borderline defences against the pain of such change, i.e. against the pain of changing the structure of the mind, significantly interfere with learning from experience and therefore prevent coming to 'appreciatively know' (hold in mind) the other as Other.
- (5) Over time, as Singer and Kimbles suggest, such encounters generate specific cultural complexes which structure emotional and hence relational experience.

Inner and outer landscapes

Leon and Rebecca Grinberg, in their seminal work, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile*, describe the experience of migration as one which not only “puts one's identity on the line but puts it at risk”. The entire psychic structure is shaken, they argue “... [because of the]... wholesale loss of one's most meaningful and valued objects: people, things, places, language, culture, customs, climate, position...”. Not only does the emigrant lose her/his attachments to these objects, but she/he is in danger of losing [the] part[s] of her/himself [invested in these objects] as well.”⁵

The Grinberg's make an explicit link between the trauma of birth – loss of protective mother, containing object, containing mind - and the trauma of migration. Both newborn and new arrival alike can feel, for a time, as if they have lost or may be in danger of losing a containing skin.

As we know, for the infant ‘first contact’ experiences are foundational - how the infant is held in mother's fantasies, her mind, as well as physically contained in her womb, at her breast and in her arms contributes in to the infant's sense of self and well being. This is Winnicott's *environmental mother*; to my mind, a phrase resonant with the implications of landscapes of mind, body and earth. The idea of the environmental mother can be extrapolated further to include the supports that mother receives and, in my mind, the actual physical environment.

The work of Stern and others tells us that the sensual world is the baby's universe – touch, shapes, sound, smells, sight, tastes and inner sensations generate emotional experiences that are hard wired into memory. We now know that memories are made when neurons fire together and make a particular neural pattern that remains after the stimulus has gone. Such long term emotional memory patterns form part of implicit memory which is processed in the amygdala and later informs the way of being, feeling and behaving that will be unique to that person. Such implicit memories form the domain of what Stern and others call implicit knowing which is non-conscious, non-symbolic and non-verbal. I feel that these first neural patterns are the first internal experiences as infant has of space and shape. They literally shape the infant's internal world. They become part of a taken-for-granted or ground of being experience.

We don't use the term motherland lightly. Mother's body is planet earth for the baby. Jean Knox uses the phrase image schemas as a way of describing what she calls a:

“mental gestalt which develops out of bodily experience and forms the *basis for meaning*. Image schemas are the mental structures which underpin

⁵ Grinberg and Grinberg, p.26

our experience of discernible order, both in the physical and in the world of imagination and metaphor...they provide a reliable scaffolding on which meaningful imagery and thought is constructed and organised” [my italics].⁶

These foundational psychic structures, then, function as the underpinnings onto which the later patterns of internal object relationships formed by projective and introjective processes can be laid. Coleman, in his paper ‘Models of the Self’ describes the self as “...the taste of experience, its quality... the condition by which subjectivity is possible...the *very possibility of ...having self-experience*”.⁷ In other words, the psychosomatic basis of mind.

James Grotstein has a different way of describing this state of ‘very possibility’ or implicit taken-for-granted, he calls it the *Background Subject Object of Primary Identification*. If all goes well this functions as a ‘background of safety’ – or taken for granted ‘safety net’ of the universe. For Grotstein, Meltzer, Eigen and other writers, these early experiences have the quality of numinous and awesome experiences of the profoundest beauty which later come to form the basis of our capacities to experience love and encounter the realm of God.

Taking both Winnicott’s idea of the environmental mother and Knox’s idea of image schemas a bit further, I think that it is reasonable to suggest that we not only build up relational transference patterns with other bodies and objects as other writers have suggested, but that we also build up in implicit memory relational patterns corresponding to the natural and built environment. A kind of environmental wrapping that I have called a *Foreground Subject Object of Primary Identification* and we could think of it as an external counterpart to the internal experience of the Background Subject-Object of Primary Identification. I feel also that it is reasonable to suggest that, again if all goes well, a similarly ‘awesome’ or numinous experience of these first encounters with external shape, contour, colour, texture – with land - is probably there which enables transference relationships of love to be established between self and land via the relationship with mother’s and other bodies.

Over time, I think, a two-way flow between internal and external ‘environmental’ patterns of space and enclosure, between background *and* foreground subject-object patterns encountered and re-encountered on a daily basis become part of the ‘taken-for-granted’ ground of being. And that this, I might suggest, enables a continuum of experience of what Meltzer has called the aesthetic object – an internalised experience of love and beauty - from the divine in the land to the landscapes of the divine mediated by the human subject.

⁶ Jean Knox, ‘From Archetypes to Reflective Function’, *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, **49**, **1**, p.9

⁷ W. Coleman, ‘Models of the Self’, in *Jungian Thought in the Modern World*, eds E. Christopher and H. Soloman, Free Assoc. Books, London, 2000

To my mind, this offers a way of thinking about not only how much we are emotionally bound to place and the places of our memories but a way of recognising that a sense of place is actually an aspect of our identity from the beginning. This, I think, becomes crucially important when thinking about cultures built upon waves of migration as both Australia and the US are and the way in which migration can unsettle and disturb our sense of identity and hence disturb our perceptions of and hence relationship to the land and sense of what that is and is to us.

I am laying out here the implicit link between the contours of the mother's mind/body and the infant's mind/body and the contours of country/motherland to set up the thought that to move from one country to another affects the migrant on the deepest levels imaginable, at the level of the 'taken-for-granted' - and that this therefore can be profoundly disturbing to self and mind. In Australia this has a particular and locally specific additional significance in that the indigenous way of thinking about 'country' is as a subjective Other. Literally, as an Other Mind.

Contemporary experience indicates, and I include my own here, that there can be a pain beyond the recognition of the loss of loved ones and necessary and meaningful objects/attachments as the Grinberg's describe, there can, I think, be an '*emptiness*' as if some foundational pattern, some essential and deep psychosomatic and emotional grammar of the soul, something previously taken for granted, is missing. *A migrant arrives already in a state of dispossession*. With the loss of the motherland, there is a loss not only of the 'containing object' and a sense of continuity - a 'falling out of mind' experience - but, on arrival, the immigrant is confronted with a disjunction between the taken-for-granted basic image schemas of their internal and hence internally organising world and the 'image schemas' - the Other mind - of their receiving environment. They are 'out of joint'. Dis-articulated. Alienated. Caught and/or lost for a time as if in limbo, as if between two minds. Again, this has a specific resonance in Australia as 'country' is perceived by indigenous people as Mind.

Bent as the new arrival usually is on 'fitting in', the emotional realities of both the 'shock of leaving' and the 'shock of arrival' can be disavowed. Margaret Wilkinson, in *Coming Into Mind*, reminds us that:

"This unintegratable affect threatens to disorganise the internal template on which one's experience of self coherence, self cohesiveness and self continuity depend. The unprocessed not-me experience, held by a dissociated self-state as an affective memory without an autobiographical memory of its origin, 'haunts' the self".⁸

⁸ P.M. Bromberg, 2003, cited in M. Wilkinson, *Coming Into Mind*, Routledge, London, 2006, p. 98.

As I understand it, these haunting or uncanny states manifest as the *in place/out of place anxiety* and are evidence of the split and split off unintegrated affect – disavowed states of alienation and uncertainty – which have been rattling around in the psychic atmosphere since 1788.

Such disavowals of one's own Otherness/strangeness make it easier to project the unconscious fear and hatred of the unknown Other onto 'other foreign others'. Land and people alike.

If this can present very real challenges to contemporary migrants, imagine what it must have been like 200 years ago. Kate Grenville does a beautiful job of giving voice to this sense of radical Otherness and dislocatedness in her book *The Secret River*.

Imagine going from this:

In the rooms where William Thornhill grew up, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, no one could move an elbow without hitting a wall or the table or the a sister or a brother. Light struggled in through small panes of cracked glass and the soot from the smoking fireplace veiled the walls.

Where they lived, down close to the river, the alleyways were no more than a stride across, and dimmed even on the brightest day... On every side it was nothing but brick walls and chimneys, cobblestones and mouldering planks where old whitewash marked the grain. There were the terraces of low-browed houses hunched down on themselves, growing out of the very dirt they sat on, and after them the tanneries, the shambles, the glue factories, the maltings, filling the air with their miasmas.⁹

To this:

There was no lock on the door of the hut where William Thornhill ... was passing his first night in His Majesty's penal colony of New South Wales. There was hardly a door, barely a wall: only a flap of bark, a screen of sticks and mud. There was no need of lock, of door, of wall: this was a prison whose bars were ten thousand miles of water.

...Thornhill could not bring himself to close his eyes on this foreign darkness. Through the doorway of the hut he could feel the night, huge and damp, flowing in and bringing with it the sounds of its own life: tickings and creakings, small private rustlings, and beyond that the sougning of the forest, mile after mile.

...He was nothing more than a flea on the side of some enormous quiet creature...Above him in the sky was a thin moon and a scatter of stars as meaningless as split rice. There was no Pole Star, a friend to guide him on the Thames, no Bear that he had known all his life: only this blaze, unreadable, indifferent.¹⁰

Writers in Australia such as Grenville are finding their way poetically into the states of mind at the beginnings of a non-indigenous sense of identity which

⁹ Kate Grenville, *The Secret River*, Text Pub., Melbourne, 2005, pp. 3-6.

¹⁰ Kate Grenville, *The Secret River*, pp. 9-10.

are very hard to think about. And continue to be so as the states of alienating mutual incomprehension at the beginning segue into ongoing traumatic experiences of mis-recognition and mis-apprehension today. Not only between black and white but also between the whites and the land and between Other cultural/identity groups. In true narcissistic style, those already in a state of dispossession impose dispossession on the Other; those already gripped by terror impose terror the Other.

Deborah Bird-Rose in her book *Nourishing Terrains*, describes the country as Aboriginal people experience it:

Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about Country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalized or undifferentiated type of place...rather country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness and a will towards life...country is home, nourishment for body, mind, spirit...heart's ease.¹¹

For the indigenous mind there is no gap between thought and place. Country *is* mind. For indigenous people country is a taken-for-granted and it works and they work with it explicitly – that is when they have not been removed from it. The knowledge lies in the domain of what Stern and others call explicit knowing as it is conscious, verbal and part of declarative, autobiographical memory. David Muecke, CSR and others in Australia speak to the difference or gap between thought tied to place and abstract ‘locationless’ thought. I suggest as others have done, that for Western mind, this implicit link between body/mind and country/mind is deeply buried or dissociated from. It takes time and practice to re-connect, and of course this is something that the ecophilosophers, like Abrams and Freya Mathews in Australia have been redirecting our attention to. But it is there and becomes I would suggest part of a taken-for-granted ‘unthought known’.

Ross Gibson¹² describes something of the way in which ‘Every Old World hectare has been ridden over, written over, and inscribed into an elaborate and all engrossing national history’. This feels true to me but I would also add that there is a depth formed out of thousands of years of interleaved and interwoven invasions/ assimilations/ reinvasions; a layering of histories of cultural experience compacted over time which constitutes a dense symbolic matrix – experienced as a palpable presence.

¹¹ Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains*, Australian Heritage Commission, 1996, p.7

¹² Ross Gibson, quoted in D. Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains*, p. 18

However, on the Australian continent the symbolic density of the West and North is missing. There was/is an **absence** – this too is palpable but takes a while to recognise and come to know, i.e. to allow into mind because its absence can be profoundly painful to the newcomer. But of course, there is also a **presence**. Although deeply unfamiliar and potentially alienating to the Western mind.

Two hundred years ago, when white feet first imprinted themselves on the sand of what was to them *terra incognita*, it was, according to DBR “already travelled, known and named; its places were inscribed in song, dance, design; its histories were told from generation to generation; its physical appearance was the result of specific land management practices; its fertility was the product of human labour which had been invested in the land”¹³. And in the words of Stanner: Aboriginal people moved “’not in a landscape, but in a humanised realm, saturated with signification”¹⁴.

And so there is and was a symbolic density in Australia it is just not that of the West and North. It is also not down deep – there is no depth in the modern sense - but it is written and inscribed across the surface. The novelist Patrick White described Australia as being a ‘country of the bone’, a phrase which speaks to this ‘close to the surface’ phenomenon.

‘Coming to terms with the country’ in Australia is a psychic necessity born out of the pressing problem of the **unknown absence** (the missing taken-for-granted image schemas and symbolic density from the North and West) and the **unfamiliar presence** (the unknown symbolic density of the Mind of the Country, the radical Otherness already and always present) which grips the heart mind of a new arrival.

This is the fate of the immigrant and the immigrant culture.

Those experiencing first contact with the Australian land as it would have been then would have encountered a space that was for them devoid of meaning, memory and meaningful objects. Finding nothing of themselves recognisable in the landscape would have generated intolerable anxiety necessitating borderline splitting.

Terra Nullius, as it was later to become known, would HAVE to have been made into something meaningful and hence Real to them i.e. transformed into a meaningful transference object. This contributes to the psychic rationale for colonisation, appropriation and disavowal of the Mind and Reality of the Other – again, land and people alike.

¹³ D. Bird Rose, p.18

¹⁴ D. Bird Rose, p. 18

The trauma of displacement therefore means that the internal image schema of the coloniser has to be projected onto or into the anxiety provoking empty space to settle anxiety. The known internal numinous image of landscape is imposed on the unknown space. And this is what we find with the establishment of “English style” water hungry gardens, the importation of exotic species and northern hemisphere farming practices and attitudes to land management in many cases unsuited to antipodean conditions.

Deborah Bird Rose quotes Anzac Munnganyi, a Bilinara man: “White people just came up blind, bumping into everything and just put up the flag, put up the flag”¹⁵. He speaks movingly of the refusal of whites to recognise the Mind of the Other – Land as Other Mind.

Bumping up blind continues in devastating ways. For the most part, the plight of Aboriginal communities – substance abuse, suicide, domestic and sexual abuse, and lack of basic services – falls out of mind. The nature of the environmental envelope that we live in is often willfully ignored as land clearing continues at obscene levels even though it is known that the soils are very fragile and are prone to desertification and salination. The expectation of enough annual rain persists against the evidence. The Murray-Darling basin river system whose flood plains produce 40% or so of the nation’s food have not flooded for 7 years. The River Red gums are dying because cotton irrigators up river have been given too much water. We should not be growing cotton. We have not yet learnt from Aboriginal people how best to use fire to manage bush and grazing land and so each year we have out of control infernos burning forest and pasture alike.

*Over time, patterns of engagement, disengagement and denial form what Singer has called cultural complexes which “structure emotional experience...tend to be repetitive, autonomous, resist consciousness and collect experience that confirms their historical point of view...”. Crucially he goes on to describe how they also “provide a simplistic certainty about... [a]... group’s place in the world in the face of otherwise conflicting and ambiguous uncertainties.”*¹⁶ [my italics]

If I have read the situation in Australia correctly, the ‘simplistic certainty’ might be the **assumption that we are in place** (i.e. that we belong, have rightful ownership, entitlement); the companion ‘conflicting uncertainty’ might be the **anxiety that we are out of place** (that we do not belong; are not entitled).

¹⁵ D. Bird Rose, p.18

¹⁶ T. Singer and S. Kimbles, *The Cultural Complex*, Brunner-Routledge, NY, 2004, p. 124

The simplistic certainty denies the reality of the Other Mind and perceptual system in the country and that it was here first. The uncertainty speaks to the anxiety of the uncanny mentioned earlier.

In Australia there is a growing awareness in some circles of the need to be attentive to the link between location and thought and location and dream and to bring this into our work with individual patients and in cultural therapeutic situations. In my own work with migrants and Australian born patients I have found that becoming conscious of this painful in place/out of place dynamic as it idiosyncratically presents opens the way for a change of mind and the growth of a mind capable of knowing itself and therefore capable of establishing a relationship with Land as Other. This seems to enable a reconnection with a sense of Place as Mind and Mind as Place.