

Two Way: Learning from each other

Editorial Introduction

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Acknowledgment to Country

We acknowledge all the traditional owners of the country throughout Australia from the North to the South and from the East to the West. We also recognize and respect the ongoing stories, culture, people, the land, the waters, the creatures, the animals, the plants, the elements. We pay our respects to the Elders, past, present, and emerging. (Eve Steel)

I migrated from South Africa in 1990 at a point of maximum turmoil. Nelson Mandela walked out of Victor Verster Prison in Cape Town, on the 11 February 1990 in order to negotiate a new inclusive democratic country. It was the most striking symbol of the end of apartheid in South Africa. It was clear the tide was turning, and this was an exciting if terrifying time for South Africa. It took me a long time to reconcile my leaving South Africa and coming to Australia – a decision that I have never fully resolved. I arrived in Australia and was met with something similar, but different.

My early exposure to Australian black/white relations, namely the Indigenous population, was through films: *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *Walkabout*. These films were confronting. I still have the final scene in mind from *The Chant for Jimmie Blacksmith* – a Black man against a white wall, with the most excruciating look on his face; the piercing expression staring out through his eyes was frozen in my mind. Each time the image comes back, I shudder. It is uncanny that as I sit to write this introduction to a series on First Nations people, run by the Sydney Institute for Psychoanalysis (SIP), I notice a book published in the series *Writers on Writers: On Thomas Kenally* by Stan Grant, with the following excerpt on the back cover:

‘Kenally’s caricature of a self-loathing Jimmie Blacksmith is a lost opportunity to explore the complex ways that Aboriginal people ... were pushing against a white world that would not accept them for who they were: that would not see them as equal; in truth, would not see them as human.’

The introduction to this Two Way discussion between First Nations people and the broader Australian population contrasts the visibility of the Black population in South Africa, with the invisibility of the Indigenous population in Australia. The contrast was so apparent when I arrived.

However, it is also relevant in locating me in this series and giving some context to the sense of disquiet I felt, when arriving in Australia and being exposed to a population barely seen or acknowledged – a group of people ‘pushing against a world that would not accept them’. (Grant, 2021)

The International Psychoanalytical Association’s Asia Pacific conference with the title: ‘Belonging, Displacement and Loss in Times of Turmoil’, was to be held in Sydney in April 2020. The conference was canceled due to the Covid pandemic. This was disappointing. Given that psychoanalysis focuses on psychological blind spots, the conference offered a chance to consider the situation of the Indigenous people within the Asia Pacific region, with a specific focus on Australia. The Australian Psychoanalytical Society also intended the conference to be an opportunity to further explore whether psychoanalysis could offer *anything* to foster understanding between the Aboriginal community and the general Australian community. It was an invitation to reflect on the past, offering a possible opportunity to have a difficult conversation between psychoanalysis and the First Nations people in Australia.

The title ‘Two Way’ captures the idea of a dialogue between First Nations people and other Australians. Two Way has become a popular idea in considering this conversation in recent decades. This idea is a reference to Hector Jandany from the East Kimberley region, who approached the painter (Tony Oliver) visiting Warmun for the first time, and then went about telling him what he needed to hear, to feel comfortable in a place so foreign. Like others, Hector Jandany called it ‘Two Way’. Hector repeated the assertion:

‘If gardiya (whites) and blackfella got together, they might be learning from one another, teaching one another.’ (Sprague, 2020, p. 40)

Coincidentally, the Black Lives Matter movement which exploded in the wake of the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, Minneapolis, USA, heralded a heightened emergence of matters concerning the treatment of First Nations people in Australia. The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* was created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from around Australia and released in 2017. Despite this, *The Voice* to parliament will be voted on in a referendum only on 14 October 2023.

It is important to note that this was not the first time that the Australian Psychoanalytical Society (APAS) has addressed Indigenous issues. Several conferences highlighting the complex situation of First Nations people and their relationship to colonization:

- The APAS annual conference held in Adelaide in 1998 used the theme ‘The Stolen Generation’, which was a response to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, entitled ‘Bringing them Home’.
- The APAS annual conference held at the Uluru in 2000, ‘The whispering in our hearts: Intuition in the service of psychoanalysis work in the Australian milieu’ was held at a time of both expansion of the life of the Society but also an attempt to connect with Australian culture including Indigenous people of Australia.
- In 2006, the APAS Sydney Conference ‘Unsettling the Settlers’ addressed the issue of colonization.
- In 2019, the APAS Open Day was held in Adelaide, ‘Nurturing the buds: Creating space for growth’. The day included keynote papers focused on First Nations people issues.
- Articles from the above conferences have been published in *Psychoanalysis Downunder*, the APAS online journal.

In addition, a significant book was published in 2007, ‘The Geography of Meanings: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Place, Space, Land, and Dislocation’ (edited by Maria Teresa Savio Hooke and Salman Akhtar). This book was described as ‘a multi-faceted attempt to understand a range of psychological mysteries of land, space, native cultures, changing eras, and geographical dislocation.’ It also includes some of the papers from the conferences. (Reissued: Savio Hooke & Akhtar, 2018).

The Purpose of the Two Way Webinar

The Sydney Institute for Psychoanalysis’ (SIP) Two Way Learning webinar 2020 brought together Australian psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, First Nations people and others to present their papers from the canceled Asia Pacific Conference. The webinar was an opportunity to speak to a wider audience within the Asia Pacific region. What follows is a brief outline of the presentations.

The series was organized around two themes: *identity* and *engagement*.

The first two papers explore the different experiences of white men growing up in Australia. This was followed by Professor Mishel McMahon's film and presentation: First Nations' Identity and World View. The next five papers by Donna Jacobs, Cate Osborn, Pamela Nathan, Kenneth Leichleitner Pangarti, and Craig San Roque, discuss work carried out in different contexts with diverse groups, young mothers, men in jail, youth and general mental health.

The webinar was attended by people all over Australian including people working in remote communities. Many attendees requested guidance and help in their work with First Nations people, which while beyond the scope of this webinar highlights the complex difficulty practitioners, working with First Nations people, are experiencing. The overall response was positive and opened the possibility of extending the space for Two Way conversations.

A brief outline of the papers follows:

Dr Matthew McArdle: 'Dispossession, trauma, and primitive states of mind: An exploration of Australia's ever-present past'

This presentation was intended as the plenary of the conference. McArdle, a Melbourne-based analyst, started the series with an honest exposition of his childhood in which he had no idea that the Wiradjuri people, had inhabited this land Australia for 60,000 years. He refers to the basic lie of Terra Nullius (uninhabited land) which his ancestors perpetuated when forming the modern nation Australia. This led to displacement and dispossession of the original inhabitants. McArdle acknowledges his shame, and is profoundly troubled by his realisation that Aboriginal people did not exist in his mind as real people.

McArdle suggested that recently Australia seems more open to reversing the overwhelming lack of interest as described by many, and is captured by Stanner as the 'Great Australian Silence'. McArdle refers to this abhorrence, as hidden in plain sight, which allowed the perpetuation of the lie, and he makes a plea for us to struggle with this disturbance and to bear witness to our disgrace. McArdle asserts that reconciling with our history requires a deep inner desire for reparation for harm done.

Allan Tegg: 'Sorry Polly, Woman's Law still touches me'

The subsequent paper is different, but not unrelated. Allan Tegg ventured in the 1980s to work in a remote Indigenous community. This experience was life-changing for him. He spent his 20s living and working in Aboriginal Australia. Tegg describes his experience of becoming ill and being treated by the women at Warrmun in the east Kimberley Region (Turkey Creek). He described his attempts to understand the people who 'related to him from a cosmology that was very different to his own'. Now, over 40 years later, he has begun to understand why and how the Turkey Creek years remain so alive in him, and how they changed him and broadened his inner world.

Tegg begins his paper with two snakes mating in his backyard at Warmun, which he encapsulates as two beings coming together to create a third: 'an expression of a creative force in which we all exist'. He believes or came to realize that the Warmun community placed themselves within that creative energy resulting in a transformation in the other. Tegg questions how two sides of Western upbringing and his experience in the Indigenous Australia, 'dance with each other'. He explains how he needed to leave Warmun, and has used his psychotherapy initially as a patient and then a psychotherapist to attempt to integrate his immense experience into his inner world which became life affirming and sustaining. The two snakes dancing could help him make sense of the wider conversation in which neither dominates. He acknowledges the enormity of the task, and how challenging this is and that this can lead to painful moments of confusion.

Prof Mishel McMahon: 'First Nations worldview & childrearing principles'

McMahon is a Yorta Yorta woman from Northern Victoria who offered a First Nations people's perspective. This presentation is not included in this publication because it was not presented as a paper. However, the recording of the presentation can be accessed through the APAS website (shop), along with the full recordings of the webinar series.

Cate Osborn: 'No interests of her own: Aboriginal woman, subjectivity and maternal ambivalence'

Osborn bases her paper on her work with two psychoanalytically informed groups for Aboriginal mothers. The first began just after the mothers gave birth and ran for seven years. The second started while the mothers were pregnant and ran for the first year of the babies' lives.

Osborn first describes the difficulties of motherhood, which includes the manifold feelings that arise in the mother toward the baby, and how the mother's experience can be at odds with societal expectations. In particular, she highlights that it is hard to accept that a mother might be ambivalent toward her child.

Osborn then shows how the pressure on Aboriginal mothers is even more powerful in contributing to this ambivalence, since Aboriginal mothering takes place in a historical and social environment that leads to an intense scrutiny of their parenting. She describes how some of these issues were dealt with in the groups.

Donna Jacobs: 'Trauma silence, and the work of linking: Reflections on a group with Aboriginal mothers and their babies'

Jacobs explores the idea that trauma breaks links, and that the use of a psychoanalytic group space enabled some links to be formed with and between mothers and their children, their personal and cultural history, and with the group facilitator, bringing greater coherence and meaning to all who were involved.

Jacobs draws on Bion's paper, 'Attacks on linking', to describe unconscious mental procedures of severing links, as ways not to see, not to speak, not to connect, not to think because to form connections risks annihilation. Healing requires forming new connections internally and externally.

A cohort of young mothers between 15–25 in need of social and emotional support at the time of entering motherhood was formed at the request of an Aboriginal midwife to psychotherapists at 'Guniwwirra' (a not-for-profit NGO). This group, psychoanalytic at its core, offered a space to come together and bring whatever experiences they chose that needed 'hearing'. The group used Dadiri-deep listening, a term coined by Miriam Rose Ungunmere (2017):

'To know me, is to breathe me; to breath with me, is to listen deeply, is to connect.'

This idea has resonance with the concept of psychoanalytical thinking presence.

The group of young mothers contributed to positive changes by being provided with a consistent open space for being and relating through a psychoanalytical holding environment. Jacobs concluded that psychoanalysis offered a useful way to think about this group, to hold the absences of mind, and to try and make sense of the non-verbal and verbal experience that came into the room.

Pamela Nathan: 'Two Way therapy on ancestral lands'

Nathan begins her paper by describing the monstrousness of trauma and describes the ongoing impacts of colonisation, violence, and racism that impacts the lives of central Australian Aboriginal people. She then refers to the work of Schnieder who describes trauma as 'too much' stimuli, which can be preceded by 'too little', the absence of a resonant object which engenders a feeling of nothingness.

Nathan then speaks of the work of CASSE (Creating a Safe Supportive Environment), which she describes as a not-for-profit organisation with a psychoanalytic orientation that is dedicated to changing minds and saving lives. She speaks of how the two-way merging of Aboriginal traditional practices with psychoanalytic thinking has enabled CASSE to address the traumatic 'too much' and 'too little' of their clients, while helping practitioners to weather the difficulties of working with intense distress.

Kenneth Lechleitner Pangarti: 'Two Way therapy – Share the dream'

Lechleitner Pangarti lives and works in Alice Springs. His paper shared the story with men in prison. He said that his group is finding that –

'a lot of men in prison have become disconnected. They don't know who they are. They don't know what their Dreaming is'.

He believes that Aboriginal men are at a crossroads about what they are going to do. The project they are involved in has been quite successful in 'unlocking' the men by asking questions:

‘Who are you? Where is your country? Where’s your cultural responsibility.’

This confronts the men with the responsibilities they have abandoned. It is here where the culture and the country are intertwined in the way it makes the person.

Lechleitner Pangarti believes that language is central to the issue and believes he needs to talk to the men in *language*. – as both the owners of *the language* and as being responsible to *the language*. In his words:

‘being in relationship to your *in language* that actually *in language* you up to do the performance ... making sure you do the right thing because it’s their mother’s story’.

This is a powerful paper in which Lechleitner Pangarti gives the reader an understanding of the work he is doing and the plight of the Aboriginal men at this junction in Australia’s history.

Craig San Roque: Japaljarri’s vision’

Central to San Roque’s paper is the statement:

‘The development of fair and balanced inter-cultural attitude means (for me) that I have the ethical responsibility to decontaminate my expectations and develop an indigenous-informed awareness of the way things are experienced within indigenous mind – body – psyche – country in direct personal relationships with myself, on the ground, as a European/Australian person of specific history and mentality. I recognise also, the reality of the exact pressure and stresses among people (in central Australia) - where our joint civilisations are in transition.’

To reach this understanding, San Roque introduces us to a series of paintings by Spencer Japiljari, allowing us to see how Japiljari conceptualises the difficulties faced by his people, and how he represents the interactions between black and white. San Roque suggests that the issues faced with creating a two-way therapy is a difficult process demanding commitment from practitioners. However, he offers hope by referring to important initiatives that are taking place in central Australia.

Eve Steel: ‘Introduction to the Discussion’

Steel introduced the final session which opened discussion to the wider audience. Steel drew on the Elders in psychoanalysis, i.e., Winnicott, Bion, Bowlby and others to contextualise some relevant psychoanalytic thinkers.

(It should be noted that Steel is one of the Elders of our APAS community, as is Maria Terese Hooke who chaired the second seminar and co-edited the book mentioned in this introduction.)

Steel referred to the not-only-forgotten but erased Aboriginal history. She questioned whether we could open our colonial minds and our collective unconscious and not

engage unconsciously with the issues raised. This highlighted McMahon's reminder that the series of the First Nation people's cosmology in which they are embedded.

Steel also referred to the important work being done by Casse and Gunawirra offering appropriate direct work with men, youth, and young mothers which have been most productive interventions.

She agreed with Lechleitner Pangarti that there has been much change, and the impact that this has had on the cultural space and the Dreaming. In addition, she cautioned along with Nathan about, knowing too much and taking away from the emerging knowing of the 'unthought known' and repeating the idea of 'going gently since one does not know everything'. These ideas are central to this Two Way conversation it is intended to remain in a neutral space that does not overwhelm or colonise, but remains open.

Timothy Keogh (Chair): 'Open Discussion with Participants'

The final discussion amongst the presenters and with the participants in the webinar was a lively interaction in which there was an opportunity for the presenter to explore their ideas. The explanation by Lechleitner Pangarti about language was particularly illuminating, as was his experience of being sent to Adelaide to study as a young person and coming to learn a new culture. These thoughts reverberated with McMahon who pointed out that there are differences in interpretation of language meanings rather than simple translation, i.e., there are a lot more connotations and purposes attached to concepts.

Meadows offered her thoughts on some parallels on analytical concepts and how these may relate to First Nation people's understandings, and how this Two Way coming together could enhance understandings. Of note was Keough's allusion to the Ngankari, Aboriginal Traditional Healers. However, Steel cautioned us to not overly extrapolate between different world views or cosmologies.

Another theme was introduced in a question to Nathan by McArdle who referred to monstrous trauma and posed the question about inter-cultural trauma. Nathan referred to the past having a living presence in central Australia and pointed to the effect of colonization which is ever-present in any understanding of the dispossession, colonisation, and disenfranchisement of First Nations people in Australia.

These ideas echoed through all the webinars. Kate Osborn talked about the desperate trauma that could not be articulated and said that one had to stand outside of it to articulate it. This resonated with Donna Jacobs' countertransference experience saying that she felt shattered and blasted apart, but talked of enormous richness and readiness. A significant aspect of all presenters' experience was their resilience, their generosity, and their humour. Further, the non-Indigenous speakers recognised the privilege of the openness of the First Nations people.

Once more, there was an appeal for caution to non-Indigenous presenters, by McMahon:

‘Sometimes it is like removing nuggets of us and filling it in as an add-on to the already developed Western system’.

This is a sobering thought, and a reminder to those in power who have a tendency to ‘colonise’. We should bear in mind the 60,000-year history of First Nations people.

These few pointers in this summary serve to illustrate the richness inherent in the discussion. The Chat Box resonated with this; participants expressed appreciation to all contributors for their thought provoking points, and for providing a space for thinking about these matters.

Conclusion

Given the richness of this conversation, we have transcribed discussion points raised in full. The rich and animated dialogue has been edited only minimally in order to help readability.

Tim Keogh ended the discussion with a quote from AM Margaret Kemarre Turner:

‘You must learn to wait. Let your thoughts come back to you. Understand how the other person may be feeling too. Appreciate you might not know the answer or understand the question. That’s what it means to work in a cross-cultural way. Respect has to flow both ways. Learning too.’

References

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following members of the Australian Psychoanalytic Society who chaired the webinars: Julie Meadows, Maria Teresa Hooke, Pam Shein, Louise Gyler, Eve Steel and Timothy Keogh.

We appreciate the work that Jeremy Wilmott did in recording and preserving the webinar which is available from the Australian Psychoanalytical Society (APAS) website (shop).

We would like to thank Dawn Butler for her editorial assistance and consummate help with this monograph. In addition, we would like to thank Allan Tegg for his assistance.

This document was prepared the Two Way Committee Rise Becker, Julie Meadows and Matthew McArdle.