

# **Dispossession, trauma and primitive states of mind; an exploration of Australia's ever-present past**

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## **Introduction and Acknowledgement of Country**

My name is Matthew McArdle. I am a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst with APAS, but more importantly for this presentation and our discussions over the coming weeks, I am an Australian of Anglo-Saxon and European heritage. My mother's ancestors arrived on this continent six generations ago from England, Scotland and some, possibly from Ireland. My paternal grandparents emigrated to Australia from Holland following the Second World War. I was born in Ivanhoe in Victoria. I grew up mostly in the newly developing in the NorthEastern suburbs of Melbourne. Throughout my childhood I had no awareness that I lived on the land inhabited by the Wurundjeri people for tens of thousands of years.

To begin I wish to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people whose land I was born on and all of the peoples of the Kulin nations whose land I have spent most of my life on. In presenting this paper I wish to acknowledge the elders past, present and emerging of the many First Nations people of the Australian continent.

In the following presentation I am reflecting on a personal perspective, or in many ways, lack of perspective on Aboriginal history, presence and trauma. My personal awareness and knowledge of these truths is limited. I grew up with a limited, even idealised view of this nation. My view of history 'turned a blind eye' to the troubling past between my forebears and the original inhabitants of the land. The destruction and lies of the past have continued to be perpetuated in the present. An openness to new, richer and more complex understandings of the Australian nation requires us all to search internally and explore externally realities of the past and present. This painful process involves the loss of previously held comfortable and reassuring perspectives, but inevitably leads to growth. This is an exploration I am only beginning. Understanding the truths of our histories is a lifelong endeavour.

## **An ancient history**

Australia's history of white, European settlement is extensively documented. Our even more recent history of multicultural migration is equally well-known. However, for many of us, the ancient, deep Indigenous history of this continent is only recently being rediscovered. For Australians like myself the history of the deep traumas of

dispossession of land, culture and family connection are only beginning to be understood. The dark history of this continent has been known and spoken of by historians and the descendants of Aboriginal culture but has rarely been seen or heard by our broader culture.

‘Australia’s history began over 60,000 years ago. The continent was discovered by a group of voyagers who travelled across vast (oceans) to a land where no hominid had (lived) before. Over millennia, they explored and colonised every region, transforming the terrain as they moved, making the country their own through language, songs and story. They harnessed (fire) to create new ecosystems, dug the earth to encourage crops, and built water controls to (fish). They thrived in the extreme aridity of the central deserts and hunted in the glacier-filled gorges spreading from the Tasmanian ice caps. They enjoyed times of ... abundance, endured great droughts and adapted to millennia-long floods ... They watched territories disappear, lakes dry, volcanoes erupt, dune-fields form, and species come and go.’ (Griffiths, 2018)

The ‘deep time’ (McPhee, 1998) history of Indigenous Australia spans three geological epochs: the Pleistocene, Holocene, and Anthropocene (Bashford, 2008). This ‘deep time’ and ancient history was not recognised by my European ancestors who saw the ‘First Australians’ as ‘primitive’; ‘a fossilised stage in human evolution – but not necessarily ancient’. The truth is that ‘the sheer antiquity of humanity in Australia – is difficult to fathom’.

### **European ‘settlement’**

As we know, on 26 January 1788, Indigenous Australians, the First Australians, watched as the British First Fleet arrived in Sydney Harbour (Perkins & Langton, 2008). The British newcomers established a colony on what they called ‘Terra Nullius’, uninhabited land. This is the Basic Lie that my ancestors perpetuated, a Basic Fault in the formation of the modern nation of Australia. A fault underlying the displacement and dispossession of the original inhabitants of this land. This fault underlies an unconscious guilt and fear of retaliation that I believe haunts my generation.

By unconscious I am talking about that which it is out of our awareness. We don’t know it is there, until it is brought into our awareness. However, many of us are aware that what we are not conscious of (what is out of and beyond our awareness) still has effects on our thinking feeling and acting. The fact that it is beyond awareness can mean that it has a more significant effect on us, but is unable to be thought about and addressed. I think these are extremely important issues and perhaps others might have thoughts to share about this in our discussion later.

Descriptions of first meetings note Aboriginal curiosity, but reasonable suspicion of the newcomers. The Cadigal people met the newcomers in Botany Bay. Days later people of the Euro nation met the British in Sydney Harbour. There are reports of warm exchanges, mutual interest and even dancing between British and Indigenous people. But conflict soon broke out. Reports emerge of killings of Indigenous people and an outbreak of smallpox decimating the local population. The First Australians

soon found themselves in ‘a fight’ for survival; survival of their lives, culture and history. The British colonists brought with them their own traumas. They were confronted with the unfamiliar and unknown in ways that were beyond their comprehension.

### **Australia circa 1970–1980**

Growing up in the suburbs of Melbourne in the 1970s and 80s, I had no conscious awareness of the Aboriginal past, dispossession or ongoing presence in Australia. The schoolyard was a place of casual and rampant racism, sexism and homophobia. Children of European post-war migrants (Greeks, Italians, and others) were singled out as different/foreign/strangers worthy of ridicule. We had no conscious knowledge of ‘actual’ Aboriginal people. However, we reserved a special place of denigration with offensive words and frequent dehumanising jokes for these unknown strangers.

History class taught me about the European ‘founders’ of this continent. I learned that Captain James Cook on his English ship the Endeavour ‘discovered’ Australia. I learned that other European ‘explorers’, particularly the Dutch and Spanish, visited the coasts of this enormous continent. But ultimately it was the British, my ancestors, that ‘settled’ this land with the arrival of the First Fleet. Governor Arthur Phillip ‘established’ ‘Sydney town’, the pastoralists ‘utilised’ land farther away and British ‘explorers of the interior’, like Burke and Wills, mapped the continent. Aboriginal people, whilst acknowledged in a passing manner, seemed to not truly exist. I recall sketches of Aboriginals standing on the shores watching the tall ships of the First Fleet arrive, but then their presence disappears.

Now what I am about to say is extremely troubling, but I think it is true of the troubling absence in my mind growing up. I think it was also true for many of the children I grew up with. As a child and young person Aboriginal people never genuinely existed in my mind as real people. This is a profoundly troubling realisation and I think was sadly too common in my generation. Maybe it remains common today. I grew up with no inner awareness of true and real Aboriginal people. It is only in my late adolescent and adult life that an awareness of an Aboriginal person as a real and physically alive individual has developed in my mind.

Beyond this I remember some documentaries on Aboriginals from the ‘red centre’, living traditional cultural lives with little or no contact with European settlers. These people did not register as real people in a real place and in real time. It was as if they existed in another world. This other world was more like the world of the television sitcoms and cartoons I watched. To realise this about myself and to tell you is sad and confronting, but I hope that it can contribute to our considerations of the very primitive states of mind that many non-Aboriginal Australians have lived in and may in many ways remain in.

Bruce Pascoe (2019) says:

‘the white history of Australia is so pervasive, and laden so thoroughly with warm platitudes of self-congratulation, that the image of the Australian as a good-natured knockabout humourist has seeded our literature and society.

The effect is so comprehensive that any questioning of the national character is met with incredulity, followed by venom ... (There was) a froth of indignation once when it was suggested ... that Australia was invaded rather than settled. We like the word 'settled' for its benign passivity.'

In recent years I have begun to see and understand a broader history of Aboriginal presence and the traumas suffered under my British ancestors; a new and fuller history is beginning to appear to me. This new and hidden history is more complex and more challenging than the idealised Australia that I grew up with.

### **The great Australian silence**

Until recent decades the broader Australian society has shown an overwhelming lack of interest and curiosity in the culture and history of Indigenous Australia. Stanner described this as the 'Great Australian Silence' (Stanner, 1968) 'a cult of forgetting on a national scale'. Manning Clark (2011) said:

'It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned into habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness on a national scale.'

Of course, 'simple forgetting' is not so simple and such 'habits' become entrenched characteristics of individuals and cultures. The culture of forgetting on a grand scale in Australia, as in many colonised countries, ignores the original traumas of European invasion and denies the pre-existing cultures on the continent. However, in recent years green shoots of looking and remembering are occurring that bring hope of healing.

The unthinkable reality of my ancestors as invaders, dispossessing entire nations of Aboriginal people is overwhelming. Massacres, wars and attempts at genocide are all a part of our history. The truth of Australian history has been hidden in plain sight. *The Guardian* recently reported that "there were at least 270 frontier massacres over 140 years, as part of a state sanctioned and organised attempt to eradicate Aboriginal people" (Allani & Evershed, 2019). Killings were carried out by soldiers, police and settlers until as recently as 1926. Euphemisms such as 'dispel', 'land clearing', 'hunting parties' and 'expeditions' to 'teach the blacks a lesson' were used to describe mass murders.

When I think of these truths the foundations of my idealised Anglo-Saxon heritage are shaken to their core. I find myself inclined to 'switch' from an idealised view to a totally denigrating perspective of my ancestry. To idealise my ancestors is to deny reality. To 'write off' my ancestors is to 'disown' them. It seems to me that the inner work, painful inner work, required is to own my ancestors and ancestry and face what they have done. They did commit horrific and destructive acts; however, this does not negate my heritage.

There is a need for me and my generation to 'bear witness', recognising the original traumas of this nation. Perhaps psychoanalytic thinking can assist. Psychoanalysis creates a safe, containing environment for the individual to discover the fault-lines

and traumas within our development, including our destructiveness. I wonder what the fundamentals of psychoanalytic thought and understanding might offer to address the 'cultural trauma' at the core of this nation's modern beginnings and in other countries where similar histories exist.

### **The pre-existing culture of 'The Dreaming'**

Until the late twentieth century, historians saw Aboriginal peoples as relatively recent occupants of Australia. They were seen as a static and dying culture and people. However, with archaeological discoveries like Mungo man and woman we have come to recognise that dynamic cultures and societies have existed here for at least 60 millennia. Common to many Aboriginal cultures are profound concepts of 'Dreaming' and 'Country'. Aboriginal 'Dreaming' (Dreamtime) differs enormously to western concepts of time, history and religion. I don't believe that I can adequately interpret Aboriginal subjectivity through my Western notions and experience, including my existing psychoanalytic concepts. There is always the risk that imposing 'my understandings' would itself be a traumatic repetition of a colonial state of mind. It is difficult for my Western mind to comprehend Aboriginal experience and subjectivity. Aboriginal 'Dreaming' is not mere myth or legend. These deep concepts are central to Aboriginal identity. I would be very interested in the views and understandings of others in this group on these issues.

It may be that 'traditional Aboriginal cultures' 'perceive or construe "history" in a different way?' (Alderdice, 2014). My (Western) experiencing of the world 'differentiates between what is current experience and what we call memory', but the Dreaming/Dreamtime is different. Psychoanalysts commonly talk of the importance for psychic development to distinguish me from not-me, to have 'psychic separateness' and to move from concrete thinking to symbolic thought. When we consider an infant's early experience with their environment, with their mother and other caregivers. There seems to be initial experiences of being 'at-one' with the environment and being inseparable from the mother. An infant seems to have, if at all, an extremely limited sense that mother and the environment are not extensions of themselves. To make this distinction which occurs over the early months of life is an essential development for the infant who can then interact with a world and with other people who are separate and different from her, with minds and thoughts of their own, and an environment that is not under their control.

Aboriginal cultures appear to have developed internal boundaries (over 60–80 thousand years of isolated development) in another way. Maybe Aboriginal thinking in terms of 'Dreaming' represents a different meaning of time, space and symbol. It may be that we are not only contending with a 'clash of cultures', but a fundamental clash between 'ways of thinking' (*and symbolising*). These are difficult areas to think about and explore. I think the current tools of psychoanalysis are too limited to understand the deep truths of Aboriginal experience; experiences like Dreaming, Country, time and place. I am curious and enthusiastic to see these issues explored further. I believe better understanding will enable us not only as non-Aboriginals to understand Aboriginal culture and thinking more deeply, but to better and more deeply understand aspects of our common humanity that Western thought has not discovered.

Aboriginal culture was transmitted solely by word of mouth; European culture used the written word. European culture was seen as one of 'advanced technology'; Aboriginal culture was seen as one that had limited technology. However, in his ground-breaking book *Dark Emu*, Bruce Pascoe (2014) shows how Aboriginal cultures were well adapted to the land and the needs of survival on this unique continent:

'Aboriginal people did build houses, did build dams, did sow, irrigate and till the land, did alter the course of rivers, did sew their clothes, and did construct a system of pan continental government that generated peace and prosperity.'

That such historical facts must be stated in our current time reflects the deep denial of aboriginal history within Australian Culture. The facts of Indigenous society were obvious to my forebears. As colonisers/invaders we were able 'to see' and even record the facts of Aboriginal society, but then we 'turned a blind eye'. This continues now, perpetuating 'the great Australian silence'. In more recent years we are beginning to rediscover Aboriginal 'deep time' history, dispossession and trauma.

### **Turning a blind eye**

'Turning a blind eye' describes well my capacity to see 'sketches of aboriginals' in history lessons and yet develop a profound blindness to Aboriginal Australia. In referring to the Oedipal myth, Steiner (1985) states that:

'if the ... crime is not acknowledged to have taken place, but is misrepresented, distorted or covered up, then there is nothing to mourn, and the reparative processes associated with the depressive position cannot operate.'

It is only through internalisation, symbol formation and the drive towards genuine reparation that growth and learning from experience is possible. By internalisation I mean a process whereby we take into ourselves, into our mind, an experience of something true, including the emotion connected with that experience and reality. This internalising is like taking food into the mouth, swallowing it and then digesting it. The food is truth and truth contains not just facts, but also emotions. When truth can be 'digested' then it can be genuinely thought. Genuine thoughts are 'symbolic'; they have meaning and are not just 'cognitive' and 'factual' but are felt and are emotional. When there is meaningful, 'heartfelt' thought there can develop the capacity for sincere and conscious guilt. This kind of guilt can move a person to honestly want to seek repair for the damage they have done.

As in the story of Oedipus 'turning a blind eye' on a broad scale requires the collusion of many. 'We can only carry on our lives as normal by turning a blind eye.' Opening my eyes to the hidden and untold history of this continent, I find myself repeatedly inclined to turn away. The extent of destruction and ongoing impacts on Aboriginal peoples is so extreme, as to be almost unthinkable. There is a need to engage in the complex, long-term (probably lifelong) task of exploring the truths of our history (for better and worse) and my relationship to this shared history.

The work of exploring in a truthful way, engaging the complexity and the many-sided nature of the story is difficult and painful. It inevitably involves loss and the letting go of my long-held beliefs; many of which I did not know I had. I find myself drawn to either ignoring these truths or finding easier stories and easy solutions to offer myself relief. Both the truths of the past, but also their ongoing presence in our lives today is so difficult to face. Sustained and meaningful change can only occur when there is genuine and ongoing awareness of truth. And I cannot know what this change for me will be. Chloe Hooper (2008) says in *'the Tall Man'*, 'if we could absolve ourselves of this first sin we might be able to pretend the later ones – the ones now killing a (new) generation – happened in a realm beyond our reach and responsibility.'

### **The emergence of 'hidden history', a history of dispossession**

Society learns more from the emergence and revelation of unknown, lost or hidden histories than by repetition of familiar known stories. The same is true for the patient who seeks analysis. We think we know ourselves and our history, but in the unique setting of psychoanalysis new and previously hidden histories emerge. These histories are both familiar and unfamiliar (*unheimlich*). They are stories of the past being relived and continuing to affect our present.

The discovery of hidden history leads to the loss of previously familiar and often comforting stories. As I discover the hidden past, I become aware that the Australia of my childhood was not the safe, generous and 'fair dinkum' place that I believed it to be. Australia was not and is not 'The Lucky Country' for all people. Unless our hidden histories can be seen fundamental insight into our character cannot emerge. Unless we can dream and come to know our complex and lost histories, then we remain unable to think. We then stay trapped in concrete, unacknowledged repetitions of past trauma and undigested raw experience.

Stan Grant (2019) says:

'I am born of deep traditions. My footprints trace the first steps on this land. I am born too of white imagination – this imagination said we did not exist. The imagination that said this land was empty – terra nullius. It is not just a legal doctrine; it is a state of mind. We were rendered invisible, our rights extinguished. If we existed at all, we were just as likely dismissed as the fly-blown savages unfit to be counted among the civilised races of the earth.'

This state of mind led Charles Perkins (1975) (an Aboriginal activist, taken from his mother as a child) to say:

'I felt I was no good, an outsider, that I was not part of that school, that I was not part of those people and I belonged to nothing. White society told me I was white but rejected me. They took our Aboriginal heritage away and made us all drifters in society. They took everything from us and condemned us from existing.'

These are histories of a different Australia than my remembered childhood of sand, sun and summer holidays.

My childhood Australia had no place for the primal trauma that came with English 'settlement'. My childhood Australia saw 'Terra Nullius' (a lie, but dominant law) as a 'fact' and subsequent policies, including assimilation (leading to the forced removal of many Indigenous children from their families), perpetuated the 'basic fault' in our 'national psyche'. The dispossessed became strangers in their own country; cut off from land, dreaming and language. The inheritance of my ancestors, the dispossessors, is unconscious guilt that we defend against, undermining growth. I believe that if this guilt and the true reasons for it can be brought to our awareness that growth and change becomes possible. This can enable me as an individual to grow, but can also contribute to the growth of our community and nation, growth that can benefit both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

My childhood Australia was a home with no 'psychic place' to acknowledge this land as the home of Aboriginal people well before my forefathers arrived. Acknowledging the truth of Aboriginal prior ownership can threaten my sense of home. And yet we all need that place called "home". "The sense of home as the ground for our being, the place we need in order to feel secure, is fundamental" (Kennedy, 2019). Without a 'sense of home' there is fundamental homelessness. Homelessness causes "loss of a psychic structure which provides a central core of our identity – a 'psychic home'". Indigenous people having been invaded and dispossessed have been left homeless in their own land. In confronting this reality, I face the irreparable damage done and a fear that these truths might threaten to leave me homeless.

For there to be more than just politically correct words I think I must continue the long process of exploring myself, my culture and my relationships (of lack thereof) to all aspects of my culture and history, including the previously unacknowledged Aboriginal history. Opening my eyes to a more complex history makes me aware of my lack of understanding, my ignorance and how often I have 'turned a blind eye'. As a psychoanalyst and citizen, I need to open my ears, eyes and all senses to recognise the deep history and trauma of my country; a history and trauma that I inherit.

I believe that reconciling with our history requires a deep inner desire for reparation for harm done. Melanie Klein (1975) distinguished between wishes to repair that were really attempts to placate others and undo past damage in a magical way with a wish to repair that is founded in love for the other and remorse. A wish to repair founded in love for the other person and genuine remorse can be both constructive and creative. A wish to repair based in a hidden wish to magically undo past wrongs ultimately leads to further harm. When our true and complex histories can be thought in a meaningful way that includes feelings of remorse, love for the other and a desire for meaningful repair then I believe there can be the creative emergence of new thoughts in both 'acts' of reparation and 'never before' considered possibilities.

### **The effect of trauma**

Natalie Harkin (2015) asks, 'How do you dream when your Lucky-Country does not sleep?' What is traumatic can neither be dreamt nor thought. Our 'Lucky Country' is traumatised with a 'basic fault' woven into the fabric of our earliest beginnings. We struggle to sleep and struggle to dream our traumas. In this state our past can neither



be remembered nor forgotten it cannot be 'worked with' or 'worked through'. It is not 'represented'. Safe and adequate psychic space must be created in which the 'traumata' can become bearable, thinkable and dream-able. Without this we cannot learn, and we cannot grow.

Growth requires truth. Embracing truth requires letting go of previously held illusions or delusions. Growth occurs when the previously unthinkable becomes thinkable. This is the analytic work in the consulting room. We need 'cultural spaces' to allow the emergence of what has previously been 'unthinkable'.

In the consulting room therapists and psychoanalysts offer a space to listen to, look at and contain what has previously been 'unseeable', 'unhearable' and 'unthinkable' for another person. Many of us have experienced situations and events in our childhood and adult lives that were too unbearable to face alone. To cope with these traumatic events which we were helpless to change and all alone with, we had to cut off from our feeling states. These events then continue to be in our minds in ways that effect us, even when we are unaware of the effects. In the sometimes painful, personal and intimate work of intensive therapy such overwhelming experiences, such traumas, can be felt and experienced as-if for the first time and can lead to new and previously inconceivable ways of thinking.

I wonder whether in our culture for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians we can create the spaces and relationships to share the experiencing of our pasts and how they continue to affect us in the present. I hope that this series of discussions will contribute to the creation of more therapeutic spaces.

### **Repetition of what cannot be thought**

Former Prime Minister Paul Keating (1992) said:

'It is a test of our self-knowledge. Of how well we know the land we live in. How well we know our history. How well we recognise the fact that, complex as our contemporary identity is, it cannot be separated from Aboriginal Australia.'

We must 'bring the dispossessed out of the shadows, to recognise that they are part of us, and that we cannot give indigenous Australians up without giving up many of our own most deeply held values, much of our identity – and our own humanity'. This requires the recognition of dispossession, the removal of a way of life, of land, of culture, of family. Recognition of the introduction of disease and alcohol, frequent massacres, removal of children from their mothers and the ongoing discrimination, exclusion, ignorance and prejudice entrenched in our culture.

Perhaps Paul Keating's (1992) Redfern Speech and Kevin Rudd's (2008) Sorry Speech (2008) indicate some movement towards genuine reparative guilt. Some have accused the speeches of being mere words and tokenism, and this is possible. Words alone do not lead to learning from experience or psychic change. Psychic growth only comes from 'emotional experience', genuine inner contact with 'truth'. 'Truth' is 'nourishing' leading to greater awareness, growth, learning and greater curiosity.

Awareness of truth involves pain, frustration and loss, but leads to greater freedom. Apologies can be more than words when there genuine guilt and remorse for actions past and present. Then there can be real change.

Rudd said, 'it is not sentiment that makes history; it is our actions that make history'. I would add that it is 'psychic action', 'psychic change' and 'psychic growth' that makes 'new' history. Anything else perpetuates the endless cycle of repeating the unthought past. Our psychic state determines our history. Genuine words (symbols), coming from a 'democratic state of mind' can move an individual and a nation towards personal change and societal change.

## Final comment

I first wrote this paper to present in Sydney at the IPA Asia Pacific Conference in April 2020. However, the intrusive reality of COVID 19 brought unforeseen and unexpected change. As I revise(d) this paper much uncertainty about the future remains. With uncertainty comes many fears and anxieties both real and imagined. Yet, the spirit of exploring the human mind and human condition necessitates that we dwell each day (*with our patients*) in the uncertain, unfamiliar and foreign. As we meet tonight in a spirit of 'two way' dialogue I hope that we can reflect on the first meetings that took place on this vast and ancient Australian continent more than 200 years ago between Aboriginal peoples and my European ancestors. Perhaps our meetings can lead to more generative outcomes and that we can think further about our nation's deep traumas and hidden truths. Perhaps we can take time to think of the 'deep time' history of Aboriginal presence in Australia for more than 60,000 years.

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