

# Two way therapy on ancestral lands

**Pamela Nathan**



## **The why?**

### *Monstrous trauma*

Catapulted into a world of a traumatic pandemic crisis heralding contamination, lockdowns, threat, fear, death and dispossession of daily life, we might say we now know something of the world of Aboriginal people. COVID-19 has thrust Black Lives Matter into the public arena with flashing, life and death, headlights and now racism has central stage.

I will now take you on a brief journey of monstrousness in Central Australia because it heralds the backdrop of work at the frontline and begs the question of two way or even therapy and/or makes it even more imperative. The extraordinary can starkly reveal potential horrors which can explode in the ordinary.

Kumanjai Walker, you might know, was a young Warlpiri man, in the justice system, who was fatally shot three times inside his house with his grandfather and family at Yuendumu late last year. The Immediate Response Team had been called in. At the time of the second and third shots the contested evidence says-the two officers 'had control of him'. 'He was face down on the ground, incapable of stabbing anyone, with an officer on top of him, and with his arm pinned under him, jammed up by a mattress'. Kumenjai did not want to return to detention. He breached his order for a minor crime by returning home on country.

A few days later I met a youth, his friend, who was next door at the time and heard the shots and his uncle, who was in Yuendumu for the family funeral; his shattered friend was mute and his stoic uncle was minding him. His uncle muttered to me that his nephew had witnessed the ‘dragging’ of the shot body; the dragging was an act of dehumanised callousness. According to the body-worn video, bulleted Kwemenje Walker could be heard ‘softly crying, almost whimpering’ (Finnane, 2020). A few days later, I was sitting in a creek-bed talking to the youth, friends of the deceased, in an adjoining community, supposedly about their offending and their rampaging damage to the police station. Instead I told them I felt a burning shame to be a Whitefella that day and they then gave voice and we shared talking.

Two way implies reciprocity and equality, to be able to breathe and have a voice, but in a landscape of colonisation which has bred violence, tormenting trauma, racial inequality and eclipsed Aboriginal cultural life, asymmetrical, narcissistic power structures and relations ultimately predominate, which negate and oppress the Other. Over the years, Aboriginal people tell us about their ‘hurting hearts’, why ‘you do not speak my language but I speak yours’, of ‘weakened spirits’, and of the need to ‘wake up strong’.



The agent of terror in trauma is monstrosity – the monstrous internal object. Schneider says (2019) the traumatic situation can be an excess of stimuli impinging on the subject – a ‘too much’ whereby the internal monster, in an explosive, violent attack, actively destroys the representational world and the subject is crashed on and torn to pieces. This may be preceded by a ‘too little’, being exposed to the absence of a resonant object where there should be one, and the result is the subject’s internal state of an extreme nameless void, breaching the protective shield. Being is then a Nothing, a No-One, getting lost from the place of original Belonging – My Land.

‘Too much’, I think represents the tsunami, colonial racist past and its sequelae of ongoing trauma, and ‘too little’, terra nullius and a terra nullius state of mind/Being. With colonialism came invasion, stolen lands and children and massive dispossession of Lands and Culture. There has been a fight for Belonging by the Whiteman,

amplified by the declaration of Terra Nullius. I think the illegitimacy of this claim, has been and remains, the relational, narcissistic wound and injury, that catalyses and festers and violently explodes across the intersubjective racial divide and between Whitefellahs too, working in the space of the racial divide.

What can facilitate the state of Being and voice that is, two-way, in the landscape of the tsunami too much and the terra nullius too little?

## **The What? (and some How?)**

CASSE is a not-for-profit organisation with a psychoanalytic orientation and dedicated to changing minds and saving lives.

Since 2011, CASSE has facilitated and developed several collaborative programs determined and directed by Aboriginal organisations and communities. We have partnered with well over a dozen remote communities and Aboriginal organisations and worked closely with stakeholders including the police, NT Government, Territory Families, Ministers and policy advisors and stakeholders including the justice system. We have held town and organisation forums and conferences and presented in international and national forums, promoting dialogue about the need for recognition of the racial and cultural divide, of trauma and losses and the need for programs which promote couple and family integration, delivered workshops on trauma and psychoanalytic tools, suicide, violence and a group program on violence, supervised and mentored and developed short films and publications.

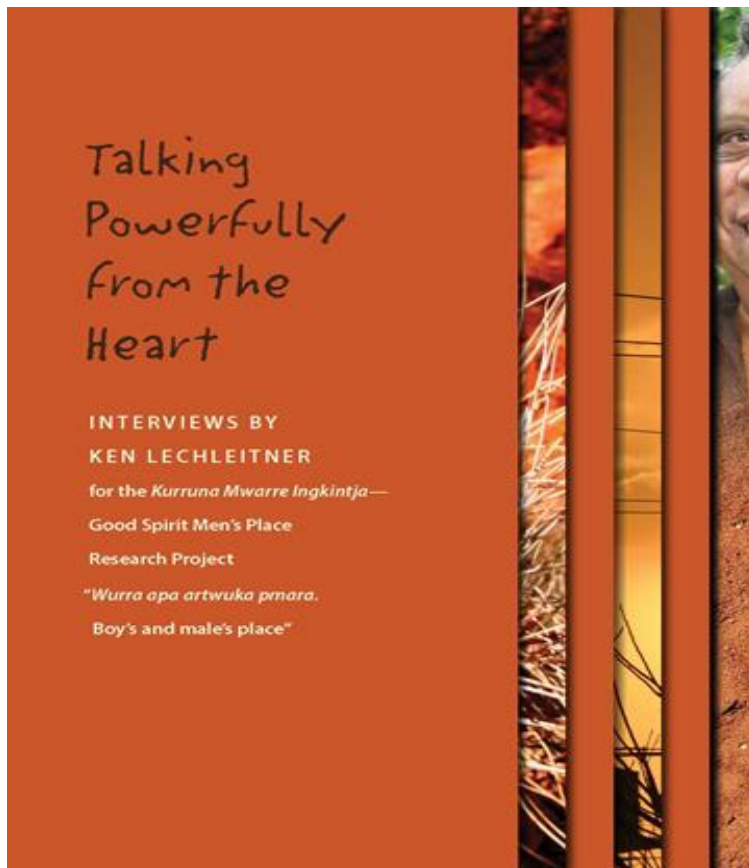




**THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW - A CASSE Symposium on Breakthrough Recognition**

Over time, different programs were generated by the people.





I'll talk about our most recent program SFLTFL.

## **Shields For Living Tools For Life**

(CASSE) since 2019 has been delivering an alternative for high risk youth in detention in Central Australia in the Shields For Living Tools For Life Program (SFLTFL).

This program has been largely funded by the Northern Territory government, Territory Families, as part of its Back on Track Program. It is anchored in the flagship Men's Tjilirra Movement (MTM), which we facilitated for four years with philanthropic funding, in the western desert, in partnership with five communities with youth and elders.



SFLTFL takes high risk youth from custody to country providing a dual therapeutic and cultural program; the therapeutic being found in cultural traditions. Tjilirra are traditional tools of hunting, ceremony, Aboriginal Dreamtime, and Law that were confiscated under western law as weapons such as the Number 7, boomerangs, spears and shields. The men of the western desert report that tjilirra are a source of pride, cultural survival, and emotional well-being:

“If we do not have these we have no language, no culture. We have nothing. We are nothing. It’s our history. A part of us”.

So, the youth are taught by their elders, who ‘give their knowledge’ to make traditional tools, care for country, have conversations with the elders and talk about goal time. The youth use old tools to make new tools for living. The youth are given agency using western tools to make weapon tools.





The men tell their story ‘in memory’ (of grandfathers) and talk about their troubles and the ‘problem life’. The men and youth are encouraged to talk about their challenges of living in two worlds and about the trauma they have endured and acted out. As part of developing their narratives, the men discover old song lines and waterholes and are emotionally moved by the aliveness of the dreaming. As MJ, ngangkari (traditional healer) says:

‘Making tjilirra is special – it is the spirit of our grandfather inside you.’



SFLTFL is a cultural healing program acknowledging and working with the importance of relatedness, family and country (Myers, 1991). Referring to Fred Myer's seminal work here, there is no self without kin (Myers, 1991). The identity of self is embedded in mutual relations with others and with the Tjukurrpa and 'one's story' derived from ownership and narrative of 'named place' and with it are songlines and sacred objects making it 'that's his story' (Myers, 1991). Geographical location, where events occurred, punctuate any narrative and sacred spaces and places entail stories and movements of ancestral beings. One's own country, ngurru walytja, is a place of security (Myers, 1991) and belonging. Being on country is about direct ancestral connections. The emotional world is inextricably linked to the Tjukurrpa and to country. Sorrow can be heralded at times of ceremony or ritual. Celebration is evoked by being on country, holding country and dancing on country. (Myers, 1991). Kanyininpa, holding is a key cultural value in cultural healing – the Land holds and links walytja, ngurru and tjukurrpa.





I know how meaningful our programs are for the youth. I asked a young man we will call Ezekiel, from a remote community, if he had made a tool on the last camp. Grinning broadly, he said: 'Yes, I made a boomerang, for the first time'. I asked him what he plans to do with it. 'Keep it', he said, 'Keep it for ceremony business!' Like all the youth CASSE works with, Ezekiel has a tool of value, something he made, a new skill, a good object, a symbol of strength, pride and protection and 'in memory' of his grandfather. Ezekiel shared with me the importance of ceremony for him and how camp had enabled him to make a tool. The youth who tell us they offend because they feel sad, stressed, scared, guilty and hungry tell us they feel happy, proud, safe, supported and strong on our country camps. The youth want to come on our camps court mandated or not. They tell new stories. There is a rising of the spirit.

## The How — Psychoanalytic concepts and tools

Several psychoanalytic concepts inform the work of CASSE and provide a foundation to navigate and transform (Ogden, 1988) the emotional turbulence, uncertainty, and psychic dread associated with profound trauma. Such concepts can be applied to two-way community work to promote new ways of recognizing and responding to emotional experience, assisting team members and collaborators to process their own emotional experiences through intense and challenging psychological work.

We use Bion's (1989) elaboration of caesura, which suggests a model for rising above every rupture to find the continuity that exists between seemingly dissimilar yet connected states of mind, events, and persons. Bion (1989) underlines the critical importance of attending to the – the gaps, breaks, and oppositions – as this is where emotional aliveness resides, but also where the threat of drowning loiters. Bion asks us to be in the eye of the storm (Bergstein, 2013).

CASSE has survived many storms with containment. A holding environment can serve to enable movement from the persecutory mode to the depressive mode of being and hold the 'too much'. On the cultural camps, the making of the traditional shield is symbolic of the protective shield against persecutory anxiety and the men are encouraged to make them. Youths make them in reparation for damage done also.



'Sorry business' and ceremonial life can engender the depressive mode of mourning, concern and repair and family life can be strengthened. The SFLTFL both recognises and facilitates the Aboriginal notions of holding on country and the country holding the people and holding the spirit strong. The holding of the country camps on ancestral lands equate to the Land is Mother and the eternity of Tjukurrpa found on country ensures continuity in space and time.

Related is the concept of radical doubt, referring to the achievement of truth through emotional experiencing (Bion, 1963; Civaterese, 2008). Radical doubt shifts the focus of thinking from content, absolutes and/or outcomes to dreaming, processes, relationships, differences, and movement (Civaterese, 2008). A position of radical doubt has been very helpful to maintain in the face of philanthropic and government funding bodies who want to know outcomes before committing to funding a program. I believe that CASSE can show outcomes are embedded in the process in and of itself.

Winnicott warns us about knowing too much. Traumatic experiences that lead to primitive defences, can belong to the threat to the isolated core, the threat of its being found, altered and communicated with (Winnicott, 1963). Therefore as therapists, Winnicott (1963, Ogden, 2018) underlines, our most important responsibility is to recognize the power we possess to violate the person's sacred core, by knowing too much and instead of waiting, in silence and stillness, for the patient to creatively discover.

Radical hope, a concept coined by Jonathan Lear (2006), anticipates a good outcome for those who hold hope but as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it – a future yet to be articulated. This concept can be particularly applied to crises of cultural collapse, where notions of the good life – a future with meaning – may be unfathomable. Radical hope provides an alternative to pre-determinations and solutionising which inevitably fail. I think the youth on cultural camps experience the hope that they are not seen to be bad or mad, and however catastrophic their experiences, that there is hope their sadness can be understood and that they will find new possibilities.

The dreaming tracks of the psychoanalytic journey, one might say, have enabled CASSE to discover and pinpoint, a primary source of real health described by Winnicott, which is the feeling of real. Feeling real, in the face of catastrophic psychic trauma, heralds survival, and emotion at the heart of thinking (Bion). Feeling real may not be measurable. CASSE has worked in the space of lived, real, alive experiences with the belief that this state of being gives rise to new and uncharted possibilities and two-way modes of being.



The principle of recognition is particularly important in working with the effects of intergenerational trauma. Recognition is as important to life as oxygen. A lack of recognition heralds a ‘nobody’s landstate of Terra Nullius – and a nobody state of mind becomes sovereign. Recognition is about validation of Being. In Ogden’s view, psychoanalysis is a lived emotional experience in which recognition facilitates the patient’s capacity to ‘dream’— or do psychological work with—emotional experience in the service of psychic growth. Recognition is about the Other and mutual empathy. CASSE has endeavoured throughout to provide a facilitating environment which fosters and recognises what is important to Aboriginal people; thereby expanding meaning, deepening belonging and allowing representation to fill the void of the ‘too little’. The tjilirra is also a metamorphic object, an object of recognition.



Working in a community context necessarily shifts the focus from an intrapsychic world to an external socio-cultural world, albeit the focus shifts back and forth in a dialectic relationship between the internal and the external. The attempt is to maintain an analytic stance in all facets of the work. Psychoanalysis can be very practical.

We do not work on the couch but the consulting room can be considered equivalent on country where Land is Mother. As for myself, when I talk to traditional owners about CASSE work or about how I might help, in my consulting room, wherever it might be, I introduce myself in relation to my kin, in central Australia, as Naparulla, and the work I have done with Japanangka, so they know I know, that I have a place and that I am not a stranger to the story of their hurting hearts.



To facilitate two-way therapy, CASSE privileges cultural experiences and differences and recognizes the containing and creative possibilities they provide. Here, the notion of transitional or potential space, a term coined by Winnicott (Ogden, 1985, p. 128) that refers to an intermediate area of experiencing, is relevant. It is in this space, between the inner and outer world, which is also the space between people (the transitional space) that intimate relationships and creativity occur. Culture is essential for survival and a sense of belonging, having a place and an identity; the language of the soul is both emotional and cultural.



CASSE also necessarily privileges the reality of race, racial divide, and racial relations, recognizing the powerful memories of people and communities to the colonial past and living present and the realities of inequality and power differentials. Crucially, in doing this work in the world of trauma, one never forgets the past of conquest, dispossession, murder, stolen generations and government intervention in any encounter or event. Traumata can re-ignite and erupt suddenly and are linked to cultural dispossession and racial inequality. Aboriginal people live these realities daily, with routine evidence of racial inequity.

We have not perceived Aboriginal people to be the problem but considered, in the words of Stanner, how Whitefellahs might be a problem for Aboriginal people and then considered what are the problems for Aboriginal people. As Whitefellahs we have tried to reflect throughout on how we can deconstruct colonialist ways of being and relating between ourselves and in the work, where relevant, subject ourselves and our relations to scrutiny and to dialogue amongst ourselves, with others and with Aboriginal people. We have tried to facilitate programs that equalise power in the facilitation of wants and the co-creation and co-delivery of programs, facilitate genuine communication, local knowledge and promote storytelling.

Being victims of colonial dispossession, one cannot work with Aboriginal people and communities without feeling the impact of their trauma. Further, the recurring dynamic of rising hope and crashing disappointment that feeds turbulent, raging, violent feelings culminating in despair, depicts a fundamental state of mind and reality for Aboriginal people in these communities. Effective work in the context of trauma and its consequences involves the deliberate use of one's self as an instrument of healing. Accordingly, countertransference—one's living response to another's emotional state at any given moment and empathic attunement to the person's

experience of trauma and its sequelae—is the community worker’s greatest asset and greatest liability. Deep listening is required, and rapport can be furthered. To work effectively with those who have been traumatized, one must be willing to enter into their experience, be empathically attuned to the terror, shame, vulnerability, rage, and loss, and enter the disconnection and disempowerment that comes with trauma and be able to reflect, process and return to one’s own skin. To truly feel with the Aboriginal communities that we work with inevitably expands who we are, while at the same time putting us in harm’s way (e.g., feeling overwhelmed or experiencing vicarious traumatization or enacting the countertransference).

Our perspective on such countertransference responses is to consider their role as testimonies to the pain of the people, to their reverberating humiliations (Volkan, 1999), and the legacies of colonization. As with countertransference reactions in psychotherapy, some essential truths may be conveyed through such feelings, yet in social and community work, these countertransferences are situated in the legacies and caesuras of ‘violent’ colonial contact and the racial divide. If listened to, shared emotional experiences and stories may be generated like I did that day with the youth in the aftermath of Kwemenje Walker deepening understandings and connections.

### **To conclude:**

In the monster world of trauma, CASSE has endeavoured to contain the ‘too much’ and to fill the ‘too little’ with stories and hope. In a two-way therapy, CASSE seeks to replace fear with hope, deadness with aliveness and transform extraordinary, catastrophic darkness to light the ordinary with companionship, compassion resilience and reflection.

