Whose mind am I in?

Reflections from an Australian consulting room on migration as a traumatic experience

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Introduction

The work of Jungian analysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapy lies in the recognition that it is the relationship between analyst and patient and how that relationship is experienced, thought about, used, misused and not used by the patient that constitutes the frame and terrain of the therapy. In the service of increased emotional knowledge, self-recognition and understanding, the patient's transference and the analyst's countertransferentially informed responses serve as a framework within which the psychic matter of dreams, memories, experiences, intuitions, sensations and feelings become thinkable and can be made sense of.

Freud and Jung were pioneers of a psychological method founded on the recognition of the experience of influence. In his classic text The Psychology of the Transference, Jung said: ‘In any effective psychological treatment the doctor is bound to
influence the patient; but this influence can only take place if the patient has a reciprocal influence on the doctor. You can exert no influence if you are not susceptible to influence’ (1966, p. 163).

Freud in 1923 described his belief that the most advantageous attitude for an analyst to adopt was to: ‘… surrender himself to his own unconscious mental activity in a state of evenly suspended attention …[in order to] catch the drift of the patient’s unconscious with his own unconscious …’ (Freud cited in Bollas, 2007, p. 13).

Jung also describes this unconscious-to-unconscious communication in his detailed descriptions of the pattern of the transference relationship in The Psychology of the Transference.

Post-Jungian and independently minded psychoanalytic thinkers and practitioners rely on this skill of unconscious perception (Bollas, p. 33). Sitting with a patient with a part of oneself in a state of evenly suspended attention or receptive reverie enables this unconscious-to-unconscious link to emerge. The analytic pair can then make use of dynamic unconscious linking processes. Slowly a logical sequence of fragments of perception—proto-thoughts, images, sensations and feelings—begins to cohere into a selected fact and announce itself to conscious apperception—a bit like a revelation. Usually this is the line that is followed.

In the analytic dyadic intersubjective space it is accepted that we are working in a culture of two minds or body-minds. Here I am using the word mind as descriptive of both the container and contained after Bion, as a dynamic emergent process as we know from neuroscience, and as a location or place. Certainly a Jungian approach accepts the paradox.

In this paper, via the theme of migration and displacement, I will lay out some of my thinking about what happens when we add a geo-psychic orientation into the transference/countertransference mix, bringing into the foreground something that perhaps is often in the background but may not be explicitly explored. Such an idea has a particular and locally significant relevance in Australia for three reasons:

1. The sense of identity of the non-indigenous population is founded upon an act of traumatic dispossession and has been built up by cumulative waves of migration.
2. Our indigenous people have in large measure been dispossessed of their land and language.
3. Country, for aboriginal people, is mind—a place (container) out of which thoughts (contained) come and are organised. This is the local pattern in the ground here: experienced by some as a foundational matrix.
What follows is an elaboration of unconscious perception as I have experienced it in the consulting room with respect to the particular theme explored here: the interrelationships between mind and place. I have permission to use all client material, and identifying features have been disguised.

Whose mind am I in?
The problem of having two mothers or coming from two places

Joan: English patient

I treated a woman in her early forties whom I will call Joan. She migrated to Australia with her family at the age of three. As an infant with a profoundly depressed mother, she was cared for by an older sister. Her father was rigid, emotionally unstable and authoritarian. A gifted and intelligent woman, Joan came into therapy seeking relief from anxiety which evinced itself by compulsive showering, depression and binge eating. Without a partner, she longed for a relationship but couldn’t settle with anyone, engaging instead in split-off sexual activity. Suffering under the weight of an internally rigid narcissistic system with borderline aspects, Joan could not make emotional contact with another because she could not make emotional contact with herself.

For a long time I found myself forgetting where she was born—in Australia or in England. Whenever it came up again, I would have to clarify this with her. After a while we noticed that whenever the question did come up we had both completely forgotten—as if it had quite literally fallen out of mind. We had both completely forgotten that she was a migrant. We had spent time exploring the emotional significance of her two-mother experience: mother with an absent, depressed and non-reflective mind—a kind of ‘no mind’ experience; sister with an immature mind. However, it was only when we could both hold in mind the significance of her experience of migration—of moving with her family at age three from one country to another—that it released her to feel something long denied. She came into contact with a terrible anguish that reflected her confusion about where to locate mother—as the containing mind, as a place to settle. This interfered with the development of a capacity to be. This anguish pivoted around her confusion about her sense of not only who she was but also, even more fundamentally, where she was.
She described herself as a child as ‘always having to contend with one thing and another’, but only in analysis could she come to understand what this meant for her: two mothers, two countries and the journey between.

In the course of her employment, she regularly travelled overseas. Each impending departure was looked forward to with the hope that ‘over there’ she would find something felt to be ‘missing’ here. Each arrival threw her into deep despair as the other place/mother repeatedly failed to meet her expectations of emotional contact. We understood this as a traumatic re-experiencing of the unthinkable anxiety generated by her infantile experience of the absence of enough containing mother-mind. Neither mother/shore made sense, nor could either help her make sense of her emotional experience.

Her distress was such that it felt to her as if she had ‘fallen out of mind’ (the primitive anxiety of falling forever) as she re-experienced the terrifying confusion of losing herself in the gap between her two mothers whenever she moved between two shores. She could not feel herself to be in place because there was no internal psychic location of being from which she could operate. It was a feeling akin to a near-death experience. She survived these trips by dissociating, splitting off the loss, and sometimes engaging in split-off and sometimes dangerous sex.

After much courageous work in analysis she arrived at a place where, because she had been held firmly in mind by her analyst, she found herself able to hold in mind the idea of the two mothers and the two shores and the gap between was not as terrifying. She no longer lost hope. She became more able to find a place to settle within herself and this resulted in her feeling more settled here in Australia. A capacity for authentic emotional contact steadily grew.

MARGARET WILKINSON, in *Coming into Mind* (2006, p. 98), reminds us that: ‘The unintegratable affect threatens to disorganise the internal template on which one’s experience of self coherence, self cohesiveness and self continuity [i.e. identity] 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’.

For Joan, because of the constant conjunction between the memory of the traumatic loss of mother-mind and the memory of the traumatic loss of mother-country (England), she could not know emotionally what her specific two-mother experience had meant. She also could not come to know herself as a migrant. That is, she could not bring herself to know that she had arrived here from somewhere else. The emotional knowledge of the separation—that she had left—became unthinkable.

Being haunted by the disavowed and unprocessed not-me experience—the unthinkable pain of loss—Joan was unable to integrate what it meant for her to
arrive (either into the world at birth or into the new country Australia) into declarative autobiographical memory. This left her as if in a state of limbo, feeling as if she belonged neither here nor there—a borderline experience of being lost in the gap between. Such relentless states of uncertainty resulted in the development of an equally relentless and rigid tyrannical narcissistic system which stripped life of meaning. There was only a force of will to be certain/right. Since there was no taken-for-granted ground of being or sense of self, she could not accommodate another and so, for Joan, there could be no culture of two minds. The other always had to be put out of mind, dispossessed of self.

When the links were made Joan began to allow herself to feel what it meant for her to be and live here. We found a way for the unbearable pain of the loss of leaving mother and country and the pain and confusion of arriving somewhere unfamiliar to be emotionally known. Becoming able to recognise herself as a migrant (having arrived from somewhere else) opened the way for Joan to be able to recognise her ambivalent attitude towards being here (in this life) at all.

Leon and Rebecca Grinberg in their seminal work Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile say: ‘To achieve the status—being an immigrant [rather than simply intellectually knowing it]—one must inhabit mental and emotional states not easy to endure’ (1989, p. 26). To come to know the meaning of one’s history is often a painful task. Joan had actually been in a migrant state of mind from the beginning.

The Grinbergs describe the experience of migration as a: ‘… cumulative constellation of factors that combine to produce anxiety and sorrow … in which the subject’s reactions are not always expressed or visible, but the effects … run deep and last long’ (ibid., p. 12). They go on to say: ‘Migration is a change, surely … but it is a change of such magnitude that it not only puts one’s identity on the line but puts it at risk. One experiences a wholesale loss of one’s most meaningful and valued objects: people, things, places, language, culture, customs, climate, sometimes profession or economic/social milieu. To all these memories a deep affection is attached. Not only does the emigrant lose his attachments to these objects, but he is in danger of losing part of himself as well … Migration … shakes the entire psychic structure … the less consolidated that structure, the more vulnerable it is’ (p. 26).

Joan is a good example of a woman for whom this is true. As she was unsupported as an infant she was also unsupported through the family upheaval of migration. The conflation in her mind of these traumatic experiences left her without foundation. She could not mourn either loss and therefore could not come to terms with and recognise herself in her experiences. Bringing mind to the gap between her two mothers and two countries created the conditions, the location, into which Joan could more fully psychically arrive, and so her experience of alienation diminished.
After over 15 years of sitting in analysis with Australian born and migrant patients, I began to notice that sometimes, with some patients, my internal reverie took me back to the beginning of white settlement in Australia. Internal images and sensations of arrival, coming ashore, empty spaces, absence of contact, unfamiliarity, uncertainty, incomprehension, alienation and an overwhelming experience of a lack of recognition were being constellated with migrant and non-migrant patients alike. It took me a while to recognise the significance of the resonance between the pattern of traumatic rupture and consequent loss of meaningful links of containing love in the personal experiences of trauma suffered by my patients and what we find in the story of the nation, for both indigenous and non-indigenous alike in their different but similar ways.

This primacy of traumatic experience disturbs self and identity, both personally and culturally. It affects and infects our discourses with respect to others—both black and white—and also with land as other.

There is a resonance here, I think, between the personal experience of an existential anxiety about a right to be which underlies experiences of trauma and a collective cultural anxiety about our right to be here, in this place. Because we are a migrant nation, these can overlap and engage in interesting and confusing ways. Sorting this out becomes a vital psychotherapeutic task for some patients.

**Whose mind am I in? The problem of the objectless space**

**Jennifer: Australian Patient**

Jennifer, an intelligent, creative, articulate woman had suffered physical and emotional deprivation as an infant due to severe eczema requiring constant wet dressings. She was often tied to her cot to prevent her from pulling them off. Jennifer suffered a traumatic early skin experience leaving her with a primitive sense of self tortured by irritation, as if under constant attack, and anxieties of spilling out into empty space (Bick, 1968, pp. 484–86). This was exacerbated by an in utero near-death experience when her mother suffered the threat of a miscarriage. Her mother was an anxious woman, preoccupied with an emotionally detached and cruel father. These early skin or boundary violations and traumatic ruptures left Jennifer in a constant state of panic and terror that she could spill out anywhere—wash this way or that without spine or agency. As a protective defence against this she grew an extremely hard carapace and came to manifest ruthless aggression towards herself and others.
As a child Jennifer could remember never being quite certain that anyone else really existed at all—that there ever actually was ‘anybody out there’. This, of course, was a projection of her own terrifying lack of certainty of her own existence projectively identified ‘out there’.

Jennifer frequently found herself hovering close to the edge of a black hole of despair and annihilatory anxiety, the core of which seemed to revolve around an internal experience of floating in an objectless space filled with terror. So out of contact was she with the meaningful life that emotional contact with another would bring, she was left with a gnawing conviction that she had no right to be here. She did not feel welcome. She lived life as if in an ongoing existential crisis of being and of being here. After many years of work together Jennifer developed a greater sense of being located in her body and considerable improvement in her sense of personal safety and capacity to think as much of her early trauma was recognised, met and worked through. This enabled the growth of enough safe skin to contain her primitive fantasies of floating away into outer space. However, she still lacked an unquestioned sense of her right to be.

At some point in Jennifer’s therapy I began to hear a similar logic of sequence as with Joan. I felt as if I was being influenced by something deeply buried in her history. My countertransferential emotional responses and internal imagery took me back to her personal and cultural origins—the resonance between Jennifer’s early trauma affecting the development of self and identity and the traumatic history of the Australian nation.

When I felt I understood a little more, I offered some linking interpretations between her emotional states and the land/landscape and fantasies/histories of the first arrivals in Australia 200 yrs ago. This specifically had to do with my recognition of the alienating ‘outer space’ feeling, resonant from earlier work, that these first arrivals must have felt when confronted with the vast openness and radically foreign spaciousness of the Australian landscape so profoundly different from either the slums of the British cities or the Georgian enclosures then compartmentalising the English countryside.

To my surprise these linking interventions brought an immediate response. They seemed to offer her significant relief from what had been, until then, an unnamed and unnamable sadness. My effort to link originary personal and cultural states of annihilatory anxiety and alienation offered her something around which things as yet unthought could be organised and become emotionally known. These thoughts, about certain aspects of her identity as an Australian woman, had, it seemed, been looking for a thinker.
Kate Grenville does a beautiful job of giving voice to this sense of radical Otherness and dislocation 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 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. *(Grenville, p. 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 soughing 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.’ *(ibid., pp. 1–2)*

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, states which are very hard to think about. And they continue to be so as the states of alienating mutual incomprehension at the beginning segue into ongoing traumatic experiences of misrecognition and misapprehension today, not only between black and white, but also between the whites and the land and between conflicting cultures and identities within the nation. Those already in a state of dispossession impose dispossession on the vulnerable other.

Separating out Jennifer’s conflating anxieties about being from her cultural anxieties about being here seemed to liberate her to have a sense of the other for the
first time. Recognising that her story belonged here helped her to bear the pain of recognition of her personal tendency to dispossess and to colonise as a mode of defence against her own anxieties about feeling alienated and out of contact with meaningful love. She began to find her true voice of feeling and sense of agency, and to become much more aware of her affective impacts on others, both personally and culturally.

With my English patient, Joan, I felt an experiential resonance as we are both migrants. But this was not so for Jennifer. And yet with both I found myself repeatedly receiving thoughts and images via unconscious perception from similar historical and psychohistorical terrain. That terrain had a borderline quality of maddening experiences of too much misrecognition and misapprehension of emotional states and too much absence of emotional contact at the beginning. Both patients suffered lost-in-space experiences at the core of their being where a sense of self might otherwise have been.

Just after Australia Day, Jennifer dreamed a shocking image which woke her with a jolt. A man draped in red/white/blue and hanging upside down with wires attached to his limbs was being electrocuted. Her linked associations were Abu Ghraib and the flag debate at the Big Day Out (a local issue at the time).

We felt that her dream was a symbolic representation of her crisis of faith—the torture of certainty. For my patient, it had resonances in her personal past, in her personal present, and in the collective past and present. It says something about the place where Jennifer lives—both internally and externally—and the state of the country as a spiritual problem. She later brought in a couple of lines from Louis MacNiece’s *Valedictions’, lines’* that came to mind during this session:

I cannot deny my past to which myself is wed

The woven figure cannot undo its thread.

The torture of certainty generates reactive states and defences—personally and culturally. Often the two are linked. This image speaks eloquently to what affects and infects our discourse about indigenous land rights, asylum seekers, detention centres, Iraq, migration, the drought etc. And, of course, 200 years ago both black and white must have experienced such tortures of certainty in ways that we cannot even imagine.

The resonance with Jennifer’s ‘migration experience’ speaks out of her confusion and distress with respect to her psychocultural identity rather than her personal identity. But the conflation interfered with the work of mourning and coming to terms with herself, leaving her sometimes experiencing uncanny states of feeling...
both in place and out of place at the same time. An important aspect of minding the gap for Jennifer meant linking her up to the realities of her sociohistorical past.

Working within such psychic domains has created in me an awareness of the necessity of becoming attentive to the as if Australian patient in the migrant, and the as if migrant in the Australian patient. It is the denial of the status and meaning of being a migrant, with its attendant psychic pain, that connects the two.

Out of these experiences has come a theoretical contribution.

The landscape—inner and outer

Because migration is a regressive experience, the newly arrived immigrant is extremely sensitive, psychically and emotionally. The new arrival, like the newborn infant, can feel, for a time, as if they have lost or may be in danger of losing a containing skin. The Grinbergs make an explicit link between the trauma of birth—loss of protective mother, containing object, containing mind—and the traumatic loss of country as containing object during migration.

The qualities, capacities and intensities of the physical and emotional environment that an infant finds her/himself in are foundational. How the infant is held in mother’s fantasies and her mind, as well as physically contained in her womb, at her breast and in her arms, contributes into the infant’s sense of self and well being. This is Winnicott’s environmental mother (Winnicott, 1963/1990, p. 75), a phrase resonant with the implications of landscapes of mind, body and earth. Mother’s body is planet Earth for the baby. The idea of the environmental mother can be extrapolated further to include the supports that mother receives from father, family, wider community environment and including the actual physical environment.

The impact of skin experiences is crucial in this early phase as Esther Bick’s seminal paper describes. Skin experiences generate sensations which later become elaborated into proto-fantasies and ideas about containment, separation, insides and outsides. Skin both contains and separates—prevents the insides from spilling out—gives an experience of, and so later an idea of, a boundary, a border between one person and another, one psyche and another.

For baby, think skin and breast (physical sensations and intensities), mother’s mind. For migrant, think country/place (especially experiences of space and boundary), smells, tastes and textures. Mother’s voice acts like milk to the infant’s ear. Anzieu (1976, cited in Grinberg, 1989, p. 104) ‘talks of a sonorous wrapping that surrounds a child from the beginning of life, just as his skin envelops him’. The
sounds inside the womb, of mother’s voice and later of other voices, as well as her own bodily sounds, combine to wrap the infant/child in a unique musical pattern. For baby, think breath, heartbeat, rhythm, intonation and pitch of voice; for migrant, think language, bird song, leaf rustle, wind whistle, wave crash, background noise/traffic.

Another crucial and foundational aspect of the infant’s experience with mother is her eyes. How the infant is reflected in mother’s eyes affects how the infant comes to recognise her/himself and so come to know her/himself as being a member of the human race. For baby, think mother’s face, especially her eyes; for migrant think intensity of light, and the patterns, shapes, colours and textures of the natural and built environment.

The sensual world is the baby’s universe. Touch, sound, smells, sight and inner sensations generate emotional experiences that are hard-wired into memory. These 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 (2004, p. 112) and others call implicit knowing which is unconscious, asymbolic and nonverbal. I think of these first neural patterns as the first internal experiences an 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.

JEAN KNOX, in her paper From Archetypes to Reflective Function (2004, p. 9), 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 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.

These foundational psychic structures function as the underpinnings onto which the later patterns of internal object relationships which form mind and self can be laid. COLEMAN (2000, cited in HUSKINSON, 2002, p. 454) describes the self as ‘the condition by which subjectivity is possible ... not the experience of self ... but the very possibility of ... having self-experience’.

JAMES GROTSTEIN (1981, p. 369) has a different way of describing this absolutely necessary implicit taken-for-granted state. He calls it the ‘Background Subject Object of Primary Identification’—the background that enables a sense of safety. For the infant, if all goes well, such numinous and awesome early experiences have
the quality of the profoundest beauty and later come to form the basis of our human capacities to experience love and to make emotional links.

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 internal patterns (image schemas) or templates for meaning-making arise in implicit memory not only out of relationships between the infant’s and mother’s and other bodies (body-mind) but also out of our early relationships with the natural and built environment. This forms what I have called a ‘Foreground Subject Object of Primary Identification’ and I think of this as a counterpart to Grotstein’s description of the Background Subject Object of Primary Identification. I suggest that similarly numinous experiences of these early relationships is probably there. Over time, 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, becomes part of the taken-for-granted ground of being.

This way of thinking recognises the fundamental significance of country (as container/contained and template for meaning-making) in the formation of the taken-for-granted basic structures of the mind and so is crucial to thinking about the traumatic experience of migration. To move from one country to another affects the migrant at the deepest level imaginable—at the level of the taken-for-granted. It can be likened to moving into another mind.

In Australia this has singular significance with respect to indigenous experience and recognition of country as a subjective presence. Deborah Bird Rose describes it this way in her book Nourishing Terrains:

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 (1996, p.7).

This moving evocation of country or land as Other not only implicitly ties thought to place (country-mind) but also it dissolves the boundary between self and Other. We could say that for indigenous Australians, country (as container/contained) is mind (San Roque, 2001, p. 30). This knowledge lies in the domain of what Stern (2004, p. 113) and others call explicit knowing as it is conscious, verbal and part of declarative, autobiographical memory.
I argue that, for Western mind, this link between body-mind and country-mind—which I have called body-country-mind—is implicit, but is either deeply buried and thus unconscious, or is dissociated from, remaining unknown and unknowable. Migration opens up the gap between thought and place; disconnects body-mind from country-mind. Here in Australia, bringing mind to the gap, re-connecting with country-mind, means coming to terms with and more fully recognising ourselves as a migrant culture. This means bearing the pain of self-recognition—the pain of the gap between where we are and where we have come from. The pain of the gap between who we are and who was here first. The pain of the gap between two minds.

Silence

In his 1968 Boyer lectures, the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner referred to a ‘force of historical forgetting’ which he called the ‘Great Australian Silence on the dispossession’ (cited in Manne, 2007, p. 34). Stanner was speaking about the silence that prevailed nationally at that time with respect to the forced removal of mixed-race children and the absence of recognition of the vital and life-preserving indigenous link to their lands. He went on to describe an interesting cultural phenomenon: ‘Inattention on such a grand scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness … simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale’ (ibid.).

Such forgetfulness I think is borne of the disavowal of the knowledge of our migrant status as a nation and what that means. Although the political and social climate has changed since the ’60s, there is still a silence which can settle itself around the psychological and emotional experiences of migration and exile and around the psychological politics of inclusion/exclusion—both past and present—and especially around these aspects of our cultural beginnings. The silence also has to do with disavowals at the beginning of a non-indigenous sense of identity that continue to reverberate through the individual and collective psyche and which both contemporary migrants and those born here may find themselves unconsciously and unwittingly folded into in complex ways.

Memento

I will return to Jennifer for a moment. The film Memento has become a way for us of thinking about her states of forgetting—of the undoing of memory and the dismantling of mind. It is a stunning portrayal of a process of internal attacks on the emotional links of mind to avoid unbearably painful loss and recognition of guilt.
In the film, a man’s wife is raped. He thinks she has been murdered. In the fight with her attacker he hits his head and suffers a debilitating brain injury resulting in short term memory loss. He can remember everything up till the incident, but he cannot make any new memories. Reality fades after a few moments. We meet him on his search for the murderer. Beset with traumatic flashbacks and paranoid fantasies, fragments of the story are made and unmade. There is the story of the truth that gets slowly pieced together for the viewer and the emerging story of what he does with this truth. At the end, the devastating recognition and realisation of the guilt of his unintentional killing because he was ‘not in his right mind’ is avoided as the protagonist continues to dismantle and rewrite history.

This is an unsettling experience, like the history wars. This film about the dismantling of memory and mind became an organising idea around which thinking about the undoing of history to avoid the recognition of the pain of truth became possible. We could say that my patient had been suffering through her own version of the history wars.

Robert Manne (2007, p. 34), in an essay detailing the history of the political management of black/white relations in this country refers to the vertiginous collapse of meaning experienced by indigenous Australians dispossessed of and dislocated from their tribal lands. Such a vertiginous collapse is a response to trauma and although their experiences in other ways differ vastly from those of colonised first peoples, many migrants to this country have also experienced a similarly vertiginous response to exile and dislocation.

**The Cultural Context and Complex**

For many migrants, terms like separation and abandonment anxiety do not quite catch the particular quality of distress that can be felt and defended against. There can be a pain beyond the recognition of the loss of loved ones and of necessary and meaningful objects/attachments as the Grinbergs 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 of their host culture.
Bent as the new arrival usually is on fitting in, the emotional realities of the shock of leaving, the shock of arrival and the shame of unknowing, can be disavowed, leaving a new migrant in a state of feeling out of joint without knowing why. It is the fate of the immigrant and immigrant culture to have to ‘come to terms with the country’ (San Roque, 2001, p. 27). Here in Australia this imperative is born out of the unsettling effects of the simultaneity of an unknown absence (the missing taken-for-granted image schemas and symbolic density from the North and West) and an unfamiliar presence (the unknown symbolic density of the Mind of the Country, the radical alterity of what is already and always present here).

In the words of Stanner, Aboriginal people moved ‘not in a landscape, but in a humanised realm, saturated with signification’ (cited in Bird Rose, 1996, p. 18). But not a signification that those first colonists would recognise. Most still don’t.

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 and the mobilisation of primitive defences including the total disavowal of the other. *Terra incognita* becomes *terra nullius*, as it was later to become known. In order to survive emotionally those first arrivals would have to have shaped the landscape into something recognisable and meaningful to themselves (again Grenville’s novel beautifully illustrates this in Sal’s attempts at a garden). This contributes to the psychic rationale for colonisation, appropriation and disavowal of the mind and reality of the other—and this continues.

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. The simultaneity of this unknown absence and unfamiliar presence can give rise to what Gelder and Jacobs (1998, p. 23) in their book *Uncanny Australia* have called the anxiety of the uncanny. Taking their understanding of the word from Freud’s 1919 essay they describe an uncanny experience as occurring when the familiar is somehow rendered unfamiliar so that the familiar and the strange are simultaneously experienced in a manner that is deeply unsettling. One has the experience of feeling both in-place and out-of-place at the same time. I suggest that the experience of the uncanny and the unsettled is thus implicit in the taken-for-granted experience of the Australian settler.

Over time, patterns of engagement, disengagement and denial form what Tom Singer (2004, p. 21) has called cultural complexes. These cultural complexes structure emotional experience and operate autonomously in a manner that resists their presence coming into conscious knowledge. They assert themselves
repetitively in support of the historical viewpoint from which they emanate. They serve to protect against the conflict, uncertainty and ambiguity that the cultural group might otherwise experience with respect to its place in the world. If I have read the situation in Australia correctly, the confident assumption that we are in place (i.e. that we belong, have rightful ownership, entitlement, are settled) arises out of such a cultural complex, and without it we would be subject to conflict and uncertainty—the anxiety that we are out of place (that we do not belong, are not entitled, are not settled). It is my view that Australian experiences of the anxiety of the uncanny derive not only from dissociated self states such as those that writers like Grenville are beginning to articulate, and those experienced by some of my patients, whether born here or not, but also from the ongoing disavowal that we, collectively, have arrived here from somewhere else.

**Minding the Gap**

My view, that what I have called the ‘The Foreground Subject Object of Primary Identification’ (i.e. primary and formative relationship with land) informs the basic image schemas that structure self and hence thought and therefore a sense of identity is a radical idea for a Western epistemology so reliant on abstraction; the dislocation of thought from place.

Thinking of country as containing object, as the Grinbergs suggest, allows the possibility of thinking of country as containing mind. I want to acknowledge that the presence of Aboriginal mind with its poetic structure grounded in the recognition of country as mind, not only as a reality alongside our own, but also as a pattern and presence that was here first and is still here, everywhere beneath our feet, has affected me profoundly.

Working within this domain has confirmed for me the validity of the link between thought and place. There are two fundamentally different minds here, two fundamentally different ways of thinking and perceiving—one here from the beginning, the other arriving here from somewhere else. Coming to terms with the country reminds me that I have an ethical responsibility to be mindful of the gap between them and what that gap means.

Migrants hit the gap between thought and place, their own and that already resident here—the cultural complex. They do now as they did at the beginning. Migrants also hit the gap/void/absence in the collective mind (Stanner’s cult of forgetfulness) of the colonising culture where the painful recognition of the reality and validity of others’ minds (both indigenous others and other others) ought to be.
The encounter with this gap often generates great confusion for the migrant.

I see in this a moral imperative for psychoanalytic practice. Being in your right mind as a therapeutic practitioner must include an attentiveness to the originating story of the country—the founding story of traumatic dispossession on both sides—as well as an attentiveness to the founding stories and symbolic landscapes of the countries of origin of all our patients and the unsettlement and disturbance they experience when they arrive here. This necessitates a recognition not only of the alterity of the symbolic landscape that was and continues to be here, but also what we habitually do or do not do with the knowledge of that, of the unsettlement and of the settlement.

Being in your right mind requires a capacity to keep asking questions, such as: Where do thoughts come from? Whose mind am I in? Whose mind is the right mind? And bringing mind to the gap—the gap between you and me, here and there, us and them, now and then, thought and place—is a fundamental therapeutic and ethical task because the migrant state of mind is resident here in this post-colonial country. We live here, in a culture of two minds. The deeper recognition of this and how this affects and infects us is our task.

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**Note**

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