

# Growing Recognitions

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We pay respect to the traditional custodians, here the Kaurna people and their land, the Adelaide Plains, on which we now meet, and pay respect to their Elders – past, present and emerging.

*“Although loss and disruption tend to be denied in White culture, most Australians have in common a heritage of loss, disruption, and rupture in relation to their own particular ancestral histories”.*

That quote by American analyst, Marilyn Charles, was taken from her paper on Trauma & Identity in Gunawirra (a Not for Profit organization in Sydney helping Aboriginal mothers & children); it reflects a sense that we're all dealing with some problems we have in common, but in vastly different ways. We are, indeed, a nation of immigrants, and the question of who is doing what to whom – when it comes to “othering” – is important...important because othering promotes a defensive withdrawal, and undermines attempts to truly comprehend “the other” as they really are.

The title reflects a long train of thought really, a reflection on the very beginnings of internalized relations. These relationships, as Freud remarked, are heavily influenced by our being born prematurely (the Caesura) and being suddenly cast into helplessness and total dependency. A primitive awareness of “the other” (or mother) in that context might be conceived as traumatic, and thereafter underly longings to lessen separateness required in maturation<sup>2</sup>. Alternately the denial of such trauma (as revisited through later experiences) might equally lead to the wholesale disavowal of early feelings, leading instead to externalization and locating trauma in “the other”. I've come to consider Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples and their violent dispossession then, in the light of these concepts. I'll explore different viewpoints that consider loss, conflict, and violence - and especially how these negate a receptive capacity to understand.

Later I'll want to emphasise the issue of shame, where one is seen in a lesser light, with feelings of being belittled or humiliated; I've come to see this as central in the racially-based difficulties we confront. How this leads to difficulty in thinking and receptivity is one of the main preoccupations in this paper.

Offering psychoanalytic insights to help understand societies has its own limitations though, in how to lessen an illusion that psychoanalysis explains everything. Renos Papadopoulos, of the Tavistock Clinic puts it like this:

*“Any consideration of destructiveness...involves moral and ethical values, socio-economic, political and historical realities...so, destructiveness should not be limited to the realm of any single discipline.”* 3

The confronting topic of Aboriginal genocide though, does not easily allow for space where thought can take hold, more particularly in White communities. Narratives about Aboriginal dispossession seem to sidestep “white” psychology, preferring to focus on the victims. In an overview of the place of our “History Wars” in relation to Second World War narratives, one of the many reasons put forward to explain this “sidestepping” deserves thinking about:

*“Those who insist only on the contrasts between colonial settlement and the Holocaust do so to disavow the very idea of an Australian genocide and protect a fragile sense of national identity. But those who do acknowledge genocide overlook its most serious implication: that of responsibility.”* 4

Openly exploring the issue of race in colonisation is a delicate psychological exercise too, described by South African therapists like Esprey : *“Race has the potential to activate pre-existing, internalized relational matrices...that provoke overwhelming affects such as shame, guilt, melancholia, rage—all of which may evoke a thinking paralysis”*. 5 That paralysis of thinking is an important question I’ll come back to.

In exploring this therefore, and the intense feelings involved, I’m trying to place us here in the position of what is referred to as the “analytic third” – ie the position of an onlooker recognising complex realities within self and other, allowing space for considered thought rather than judgement – in this instance, about the white side of the racial equation.

Wilfred Bion developed a theory of thinking which started at the archaic beginnings of sensory life and capacities for thinking, to encompass an increasing ability for abstract thought as development proceeds. I suggest that exploring early, archaic intense beginnings of thinking, involving intense feelings of helplessness, loss, and dependency might promote a space to think about the potentially unthinkable, such as otherness.

In discussing what he viewed as a societal crisis in 1947 after WWII, Bion suggested that : *“Hope rests on the development of techniques capable of facilitating emotional development, and it is this that psychological institutions should offer a society in crisis”*.6

To clarify what seemed to be the societal crisis that started this train of thought, I’ll begin with a newspaper article, and briefly digress to the Aboriginal side of the equation before considering how one might theorise these issues.

Some years ago *The Saturday Paper* 7 reported on the profoundly disturbing story of child suicides in Looma, WA. The *“school game of hangsies”* involving Aboriginal children as young as 10 suiciding in the schoolyard evoked disbelief, and for myself, a kind of frozen disbelief where I doubted the words on the page. Since then, this issue evolved into a rolling epidemic. The reactions of others at the time however, seemed blinkered and concrete. This quote came from medical experts who forcefully advocated intervention:

*“The bleeding-heart approach of always explaining away Aboriginal youth suicide and Aboriginal malady by talking about the real but historical trauma of these communities*

*doesn't get us anywhere,"* 7. It went on, detailing current medical knowledge (stress hormones, anxiety, and substance abuse) and how it might inform treatment.

This was astonishing because any place for psychology was grandiosely dismissed in favour of notions of "biology", and "behaviour". That suicide might have been a collective response to an intergenerational trauma was never canvassed. The emphasis was on "explaining away" and obliterating something traumatic, with no space for grappling with its import. At that moment there was a realisation, in the Bionian sense, that the white colonising project was still going on – now involving an annihilation of intergenerational emotional history mediated through the devices of modern biotech wizardry.

In late 2018, the historian Prof Lyndall Ryan spoke at The University of Adelaide about Frontier Massacres. She had detailed and mapped over 300 documented massacres of Aboriginal people since 1788 across the country. Her book, *Remembering the Myall Creek Massacre*, 8 is notable because that particular massacre in 1838 also included accountability. Unusually for the time, some of the white perpetrators were tried and held responsible despite a public outcry by the Establishment.

In a private conversation later, Prof Ryan confided that she tended to calibrate the details of what she presented to audiences. The brutality of those massacres remains vivid in Aboriginal minds, often evoking uncontained feelings in audiences and strident demands for accountability, which in turn evoke defensive responses. At those points, it seems clear enough, the capacity for thought dissolves in the vicious circles created, and so nurturing a space for thinking becomes critical.

As an aside, in researches on societal violence more generally, a "latency period" has been regularly described, where increasing recognition and activism follows a long seemingly dormant period, but then asserts itself two or three decades after the original events (personal communication). It may be then, that thinking in order to help modulate the groundswell of *violent* activism we now see might be the very contribution that Bion suggested.

In thinking about this "all-or-nothing" reaction to horrendous brutality, it seemed that any capacity for holding complexity is the first casualty. Considering the colonial settler group, it was clear they were a motley bunch. There was the Officer Class, bringing their own Imperial values. There were the Convicts with their varied histories of dispossession and deportation distorting their own psychology, one assumes. But then there were others, like the Point Puer Boys, deported at the age of 8 for trivial offences in order to clear up the streets of London. Point Puer, in Tasmania, saw half of them taught basic survival skills while others did not survive. We know that early traumatic dispossession can lead to disorganised behaviour, impulsivity and aggression; what we don't know is how much of this was later visited on Aboriginal people by those survivors, for example in the infamous "roving parties". But it does seem in chronicles from what is referred to as The Vandemonian War 9, that there was an organised military pincer movement, potentially as an "identification with the aggressor", designed to rid Tasmania of its native people. All in all, there was a complex psychological disturbance at play, without it being clear who was projecting what into whom amongst these groups.

By way of contrast, going back to Prof Ryan's talk, the Welcome to country before that lecture was highly significant. An Aboriginal Elder, Georgina Williams, was depicting Country as a living symbol connected with inner cultural attitudes, whose near-destruction was still

very much alive for her; but that internal connection to Country that symbolically still informed her life, had not been destroyed, and it seemed as if one was paradoxically listening to an alive and timeless unconscious process being openly experienced.

This led me to rethink how we have a limited view of Aboriginal culture. Partly, this stems from what the anthropologist Bill Stanner<sup>10</sup> called “The Great Australian Silence”, referring to our negation of history. But as well, Aboriginal elders have had a policy of not revealing the detailed nuances of their cultural practices to outsiders, in an attempt at preserving culture. So, to borrow from Nemas, we require a deal of “imaginative conjecture”<sup>11</sup> since we cannot easily access secret knowledge – but this now may have more space to emerge.

There’s a complexity in Aboriginal society, without romanticising it, which has, for example, an oral rather than written tradition; arguably this allows for the passing on of nuanced understandings and intuited meanings, and greater connectedness across generations. “Elders” pass on acquired knowledge, in a sophisticated way of “watching” each others’ development as a way of assessing “readiness” to abstract, and hand down intuited forms of thinking, along with the wider import of ancient knowledge and its continuing symbols attached to Country. San Roque, a Jungian analyst in central Australia, describes a different aspect of this nuanced thinking, when he says:

*“This Indigenous Australian ‘technique’ of placing oneself in an attitude of carefully paced, receptive, global attentiveness while actually listening to someone, will be familiar to psychotherapists who have also cultivated a lineage of deep listening of the kind rediscovered by Freud and developed further by Jung.”*<sup>12</sup>

A different example: consider the Emu Constellation, which recently inspired the name of an important, and controversial new book. This appears in the night sky at yearly intervals but is only recognised by looking at the black shape between the stars, rather than joining stars up with imaginary lines. It heralds the time when emu eggs can be found, all this betraying an acute observational capacity for the abstract, much like Bion’s urgings to use “a beam of intense darkness”<sup>13</sup> to allow different, rather than ordinary, perspectives to reveal themselves.

Rituals such as “sorry business”, deal collectively with grief and loss. Examples of a differently developed understanding which used to involve severe physical punishment, emphasised cultural protocols about how / when this was done - but dictated that the “avenging party” needed to then look after the victim’s family for the several months it took to heal the male victim’s wound.

Or one might consider Stanner’s 1959 essay “Durmugam: A Nangiomeri”<sup>10</sup> where he first encountered this man from the Daly River in northern Australia in 1932 in the midst of a large spear fight. Stanner writes *“The battle died, as if by agreement towards sundown, and some of the antagonists began to fraternise, others to drift away. No one had been mortally hurt though many had painful flesh-wounds.”*

All these are highly reminiscent of an awareness of the need to manage destructiveness, mourning and reparation; however this evolved over 60,000 years, long before psychoanalysis broached these same issues. And I’d argue these practices, amongst other things, reflect culturally distinct notions of self & other, rather than an absence of such awareness, as has been described by others in their attempts to understand contemporary Aboriginal societal dysfunction.

Aboriginal activists meanwhile, are redefining their history to correct old tropes. Claire Coleman, for example, the author of the novel *Terra Nullius* says: “*We don’t have to imagine an apocalypse, we survived one. We don’t have to imagine a dystopia, we live in one*” 14, referring to Aboriginal views on invasion and colonisation.

On the other side there are her detractors (from January 2019) arguing this: “*If the continent had never been colonised, Ms Coleman would not be writing novels. She would be illiterate, without a roof over her head or a room of her own*” 15.

We recognise this as the argument against the so-called “black armband view of history”; but by perpetuating the myth of the uncivilised, saved from themselves, it furthers a narrative which features overvaluation, contempt and hostility. Klein might have called it a manic defence to ward off a depressive recognition of harms done. More recently, Straker, again referring to South Africa, might have seen this as warding off a “racial melancholia” resulting from the growing recognition of the ongoing and real effects of racial colonisation, where “*the privilege of whiteness emerges as a result of the exclusion of the racial other*” 16.

Straker goes on to suggest that in the normal, day-to-day moments of the clinical encounter, we as therapists draw on theory as a conduit to the restoration of the containing function—to reorientate ourselves.

We might then turn to considering a particular point in Bion’s views on developing a capacity for thought, as a useful way of theorising – and possibly starting to contain – the sequelae of colonial difficulties.

But first, a clinical observation of a different colonial experience. In my own training analysis, much time was concerned with my first 6 years in Cairo. The family was European, white and privileged; there was the large 3rd floor apartment, the wrought iron lift encircled by the marbled staircase, the large marbled lobby, and the doorman keeping watch at the gate – all the things one might see in a mid-20th century movie. I had mentioned in passing, in that analysis, that the household itself included a small circle of Egyptian & Sudanese domestic help, as was common in post-war Cairo. Relationships seemed freely formed, it seemed to me, often accommodating several languages.

Curiously, looking back when this had come up in the analysis their presence, significance and later disappearance, seemed mysteriously unresolved. This gradually became a gap which niggled in various ways over many years.

Some time later, this period again came into focus, perhaps because of some overseas analytic sessions, and the tying up of those loose ends. These became pivotal to reflections on a space to think, and just how that Egyptian household had been able to be retrieved.

The point that preoccupied me was the latter experience of another person listening to something I’d already raised years before, that again presented itself as something in passing but not in detail, that opened a door to a wider social view. Clinically, I had long been aware that often, what patients respond to are not interpretations only. And also, what patients do might be more significant than what they say – had I, eg, presented this “in passing” so that it would indeed be passed over? It’s hard to be sure...but I doubted it.

What stood out was that when there was the receptive presence of another mind, that receptivity itself seemed a necessary ingredient for an intuitive grasping of the significance of detail, allowing other meanings to evolve. More recently I've come to wonder whether my original analysis around this question had, unknowingly, been affected by that very paralysis around racialised thought that Esprey so clearly described, given my analyst and I had both coincidentally started in Africa. But what promoted that paralysis and its later dissolution puzzled me.

Paul Williams, a British psychoanalyst, in reflecting on his beginnings as an analyst, had this to say: *"It was here that I began to grasp why it is not possible to understand any of the most important things in life without talking about them with another person who is receptive and open-minded."* 17 Here, he was referring directly to talking and "hearing", as well as "interpreting".

Some years ago, a long-standing patient emerging from a life lived in the shadow of parental grief, in reflecting on an exploratory comment I'd tentatively put forward the day before (where I'd been thinking aloud) said something like this: *"I was thinking about what you said, but what struck me was how, when you floated the idea, you added "but maybe it's just me"; it's like a bolt of lightning, that you can be just you, and that I could be me too"*. What they seemed to be indicating was the significance of a type of presence I represented at that moment, where a receptivity to something uncertain, other than the words, was more significant.

Neville Symington, more locally, described something similar: *"The ... quality of the maternal mind is its liveliness and responsiveness, the quality of going out to meet the other/baby, not just to contain it. The important point here is this meeting of the other..."* 18

So having found myself going back to meet a colonial past, I was confronted on one hand by an inquiry into an older, opened-up, internal thinking space, while on the other hand I was reading about the obliteration of an Aboriginal psychological space.

To understand the scale of destructiveness considered in historical trauma, Adam Jones (in his *Comprehensive Guide to Genocide*) states, of the Aboriginal genocide:

*"The destruction was so immense that it was often claimed (now incorrectly) that one Aboriginal population, that of Tasmania, had been exterminated down to the last person"* 19

The extent of genocidal loss is reflected in views expressed by Papadopoulos too: *"...individuals are likely to lose a great deal...(like) the reality of belonging to a certain language group, a particular geographical landscape & faith in humanity"* 3.

That loss of geographical landscape and language was, in my case, familiar. The armed revolution in Cairo of the 1950s, brought about by the Suez Canal crisis in Egypt, also had its origins in part to an opposition to British colonial power. Armed street clashes and violent uprisings had led the family to realise that the time had come to leave.

When I did however return to Cairo 45 years later, what immediately struck me was the smell of the place; it was instantly recognisable, a familiar mixture of street food, a heaving mass of humanity and diesel fumes that triggered an archaic memory of belonging. At the same time, I was "the other", the tourist; every seemingly new site evoked old family stories which

necessitated coping with contradiction. Returning to where we had lived, and despite a feeling of home-coming, I saw the large lobby was now littered with old newspapers, the small courtyard and marbled stairs were not so sparkling, there was no doorman. The de-colonising turn of events years before had left its mark.

The old art-deco neighbourhood, familiar from old photos evoking grandeur and privilege, was still there. Back in the apartment of old, different roles and power structures had existed though thankfully without the more marked signs of discrimination. Later, as migrants, roles again shifted where we found ourselves referred to as “New Australians”, a rather more polite phrase than the term “dago” used in the schoolyard. An extended family however, perhaps allowed space for a dawning awareness that being “othered” was a fluid proposition heavily based on power, geography and internalised context. Emigrating can be a shaming experience, involving as it does issues of sudden loss, powerlessness, and uncertainty – all of which butt up against previously held convictions of agency. Racism, however, seems to occupy an extreme end of “otherness” as it brings with it entrenched societal structures that promote disadvantage; these perhaps serve to more easily receive the evacuated aggressive and persecuting anxieties of the dominant group, in a vicious circle where no-one wins.

So it makes sense to me when Aboriginal people talk of a connection to Country. I can't know their experience, having as it does a deep cultural and spiritual significance. But it resonates with me that re-establishing an internal connection with one's origins is more than just useful. Looking back, my own origins had been closed up as a way of warding off contradictory events and confusions at finding ourselves helpless in the face of the sweep of events imbued with fantasies and realities of life and death; but all still somehow pushing for comprehension. The significance of loss of connections to Country then, may be severely underestimated, it seems to me because connectedness to origin goes hand in hand with receptivity at very old levels. Looking back, that sense of home-coming had less to do with revisiting a *place*, and more to do with retrieving a necessary personal *history* in the company of an other.

How then might we start to think about old and early experience, and receptivity? Bion's daughter Parthenope, and an analyst too, describing the origins of internal dyadic relationships that affect receptivity, suggested that

*“... for Bion, thinking was not really to be considered as an activity for the individual. ...It is very clear ...the process which will lead eventually to thinking, is firmly based within the dynamics of the mother-infant dyad. What is perhaps not so obvious is that throughout the individual's life his thought processes go on availing themselves of those internalised dynamic relationships.”* 20

Marilyn Charles describes these ideas of development like this: very early infantile experience involves patterns of experience emerging out of a primordial sensation-dominated mode of being, a kind of soup of sensation, which Tustin referred to as “auto-sensuous”, and which Bion described as “unformed beta elements”. These experiences are “patterned” by the reciprocal resonance of the mother, who mediates levels of primitive anxiety. Bion describes the way the “infant mind's” surplus of raw sensations are gradually picked up, separated, made sense of and then responded to, by the mother's attuned mind. Images like these convey reciprocal actions and reactions. Bion creatively used his metaphor of the container / contained to depict this setting where unformed thought finds its place in the mother before being safely returned to the infant, allowing for the activity of

“meaning-making” and intuitive understanding to evolve – ie, through the mother’s *“alpha function”*.

That very early phase, Charles points out, is an aspect of personality generally; as such, the capacity to build through repetitive experience, attach increasing levels of meaning to sensory information at archaic levels within the self, and then to abstract becomes the foundation on which learning is built.

But – and this seems critical - these archaic levels of experience are associated with survival issues, so that intense fear, if not sufficiently modulated or contained, results in freezing out *receptivity of meaning*. Primitive fears involving unmet needs of helplessness arouse intense defences, to escape uncontained fantasy fears of chaos threatening to swamp the infant mind.

Referring to these neonatal anxieties of disintegration or “falling to bits alternating with experiences of being picked up”, Hinshelwood sums up

a Kleinian view like this:

*“The initial phantasy of an annihilating destruction is the crucial, bedrock, psychological experience. The dynamics start here. The rest is the defensive manoeuvres to escape the experience.”*<sup>3</sup>

In essence, overwhelming feeling obliterates the space between two people where new meanings might emerge, freezing any development of thought. A meeting of minds is not possible.

This reminds us of Esprey’s 5quote earlier where :*“overwhelming affects such as shame, guilt, melancholia, rage.... evoke a thinking paralysis”*. A historical example perhaps makes the point about how archaic fears might be recapitulated in later contexts.

Gregorio Kohon, a British analyst who briefly lived in Brisbane, wrote about the destruction of the Aztecs. In trying to understand the defeat of the Aztecs, he describes a confusion arising at their first meeting. Montezuma presents elaborate gifts to the Spanish invaders. Cortez, ruthless and greedy, sees these gifts as submission – completely missing the point that gifts are Aztec displays of power. Montezuma too is not awake to the point that these visitors don’t see the world through Aztec eyes. As Kohon describes, misunderstandings multiply and *“neither party was able to translate the other’s experience. There was no gap that might be negotiated by analogy or metaphor, where comparisons might help negotiate the difference between self and other.”*<sup>21</sup>

Bruce Pascoe, an Aboriginal language researcher and writer describes a strikingly similar meeting between early settlers and the Wati Wati clan, where Indigenous behaviours and language were equally completely misunderstood, thus enabling a contemptuous and almost complete destruction. In his recent book, *Dark Emu*, Pascoe details the many early and wilful misconceptions around Indigenous culture stating *“...preconceptions ...are so powerful that he, the settler, skews his detailed observations to that prejudice.”*<sup>22</sup> In essence, Pascoe describes settlers dismissing the evidence of their own eyes, intense fear, anger or submission to Empire operating to negate a capacity for thought or recognition of “any other” way.



In exploring the question of violence in our own history, Thomas Rogers<sup>23</sup> in his book *The Civilisation of Port Phillip, Settler Ideology, Violence and Rhetorical Possession*, takes up the work of contemporary philosopher, Slavoj Žižek; he describes “systemic violence” found in oppressive socio-political structures, and “linguistic violence” embodied in language. Rogers concludes: “...*In each type of violence, the real effects of violence were never far from the surface. The law that prevented Aboriginal witnesses from giving evidence (under oath) meant that the murder of their kin could continue without redress. Defining violence as systemic or linguistic can never be dismissed as wordplay*”.

Colonising violence then, had internal and real-life consequences for all involved.

Bion, as far as I know, did not write about shame explicitly – but Adam Jones’s writings on genocide outline how major forces behind war, colonial settler violence, and genocide, are rooted in humiliation and shame. Others<sup>24</sup> have noted “*that shame is apt to be the most unrecognised and unacknowledged of all the affects*”. Indeed, world wars like WWI have their origins in feelings of national humiliation and the need to obliterate it. Montezuma became the humiliated victim of Cortez, by being “looked upon”, given the Aztec tradition that saw him as a deity; Pascoe too describes the effects of fear and humiliation leading to retaliation. The Suez crisis was arguably partly triggered by the humiliation of General Nasser when the US refused to keep their promise to fund the critical Aswan Dam project.

Thomas Scheff, writing on *Shame and a Theory of War*<sup>25</sup>, agrees with Jones by suggesting that describing *land & resources theft as reasons for colonial wars leads to “the complete hiding of shame that can lead to feedback loops “of never-ending vengeance”*.

Bion suggested that we all have, to varying degrees, neurotic and primitive aspects within our makeup. It has been argued that shame is important, and “as an actual felt experience is traumatic”<sup>26</sup>. It acts as a switch that promotes primitive modes of thinking, and omnipotent defences. Shame occurs, ‘when we feel we are placed out of the context within which we wish to be interpreted’. The experience of being placed out of context can equate to a ‘psychically life-threatening lack of love’, giving rise to what is described as ‘secondary terror’<sup>26</sup>, undermining the potential for reflexive thought. The result of this switch enables the subject to use splitting, fragmentation and ‘excessive projective identification’ (Bion, 1967, p. 61) to evacuate an unbearable shame and secondary terror. Violence then diminishes the intensity of shame, though replacing it with psychotic pride or grandiosity.

So I’ve returned to what puzzled me earlier about the negation of thought, and its dissolution by a receptive other. That is, that violent feedback loops trigger the survival anxieties referred to by Charles, which then freeze any capacity for reflective thought, all in turn *triggered* by perceptions of shame – rather than shame being a later consequence.

However where people, in general, are helped to build confidence in their personality, there is an alternative form of reality-based pride that is promoted and people can become less prone to this damaging switch.

It becomes clearer then why shame (and humiliation) are such crucial triggers of violence, given the existential / annihilatory dread evoked. The resulting paralysis of thinking, I’d suggest, is not often thought of as a violent internal defence against shame itself. Clinically too, it is not clear to me when an interpretation evokes a violent reaction, how often this might not be purely defensive— do we unknowingly shame the patient with our words,

formulations and techniques? An awareness therefore of the link between shame and violence seems necessary.

A different angle on this concept is Bion's stated aim in treating people "so that the individual could have the experience of making sense in the mind of another" 27; or perhaps stated differently, being received in the mind of the other without feeling shamed.

I'd like briefly to digress to a geopolitical perspective, hopefully to place White colonisation into a historical landscape. Colonised peoples, whether forcibly subdued or not, easily fit into Jones's thesis of being left in a humiliated state, facilitating violence but more importantly, freezing the capacity for thought on both sides. This may well have been more so with Aboriginal people since, as Jeremy Bentham pointed out, Cook's order to negotiate a treaty was just ignored. Britain in the late 1700s had just suffered its own shameful defeat by unexpectedly losing the American colonies; it has been argued that this led directly to "Cook's secret mission", to colonise and regain land regardless of native sentiment, in order to "restore" (rather than repair, as Nemas<sup>28</sup> points out ) the Empire's standing.

In other words, Britain's shame and humiliation was unthinkable for its leaders, who Jones describes as "omnipotent"; arguably it paves the way for the expulsion of such feelings on a grand scale, the violence and dispossession being foisted on an unknowing Aboriginal population far from scrutiny. Seen in that light, we are confronted by an intergenerational, and cultural evacuation of shame that facilitates violent rage, just as Scheff describes. Or, as others put it, "*acts of organised war might be regarded as a politically sanctioned switch (that is, to primitive processes)*" 26

Just how this manifests too, across generations, might be seen in the significance of what a mother's mind, or alpha function, brings for the infant. It's worth considering, as Chester<sup>29</sup> reminded us, that her own mind was itself once also subjected to another, earlier mind and alpha function, and so back through the generations. Arguably a centrally important function then is that of facilitating the continuity of ongoing generational links. John Boulton<sup>30</sup>, a paediatrician working in the Kimberleys, rightly states that colonisation, manifested in part by the deliberate removal of Aboriginal children, ( which by the way still happens in NSW) destroys the totemic links that bind generations within culture in Aboriginal community, and so represents a violent and visible humiliating destruction.

Charles too, strikes a similar note: "*This disruption of familial and cultural ties, as happened in Australia with the Stolen Generation, was profound ... disruption of the social interactions that are the "primary means of instilling self-esteem, a positive cultural identity, empathy, language development and curiosity about the world"* (p. 7). *In this way, also impeded was the ability to pass along those essential capacities to the next generation. For a culture in which kinship ties are such an important aspect of identity, the effects of the disruption of these ties has been particularly devastating*" 1

And a quote from the Bringing Them Home Report: "*The thing that people were denied in being removed from family was that they were denied being read as Aboriginal people, they were denied being educated in an Aboriginal way*" 31

So I'll briefly recap, hopefully to lift us out of the primordial soup; what I'm suggesting is this:

- Infants are of course inherently fragile, with powerfully intense experiences

- There's a need for another mind to facilitate the co-creation of a capacity for meaning-making
- If excessive early anxieties are not picked up and modulated, and instead are not "tuned into", annihilatory fears become overwhelming, and violent reactions can be triggered until a holding can occur
- Shame, by virtue of being the result of being placed "out of context", reignites fears of being dropped into bits & pieces
- The resulting violence, as a defence, can easily overshadow the triggering role of shame...and that all the intense feelings freeze out thought while psychic survival is attended to.

These considerations about fundamental difficulties in bearing the role of violent feelings which disable thinking to defend against shame, might also suggest a way to conceptualise a different approach – and not just to enable a receptive dyadic relationship in the consulting room.

A simple illustration makes the point at a societal level, about the effect of receptivity leading to a creative outcome. Charles Massy<sup>32</sup>, a farmer now at ANU after completing a PhD, wrote *The Call of the Reed Warbler*. The book documents the moment when he suddenly saw — not a land made efficient and productive by the application of agricultural science, but a land emptied of its relationships and webs of life by a kind of collective psychosis, as one reviewer put it. These are Massy's words:

*"...it was in the midst of this journey that I met a local indigenous Ngarigo elder/senior law-man, Rod Mason, who changed my thinking about country. When, through his strong oral history tradition, he was able to describe what the country had been like pre-1820s (and the first white settlement) I then realised we had lost the crucial small water cycle."*

Massey then realises, as with Pascoe earlier, that Aboriginal traditional farming was much more attuned to accommodating the land in a cooperative way; a way that outstripped so-called "modern farming", a way that had once made the so-called "central desert" a place of agriculture. When Massey restored his land by recognising the inherent value of Aboriginal knowledge, he noticed the return of flocks of Reed Warblers, hence the title of his book.

We might consider too, that if reconciliation and reparation are to have a chance, then safeguarding the spaces that facilitate thinking require careful consideration. Some importance might be given to whether anything shuts down potential thought. Whatever gives rise, therefore, to overwhelming affects of shame and revenge might be mitigated. In practice, this means reducing structural inequity and discrimination; dialogue might become more than empty words.

Critically, we would look more carefully at issues of humiliation, given the dire sequelae; violent rage leading to a downward spiral of law & order responses which emphasise humiliation will be seen to only lead to vicious circles, as in detaining Aboriginal youth. Acts of provocative dismissal, like the rejection of the Uluru Statement<sup>33</sup>, can rightfully be seen as the public humiliations they really are. Similarly, institutional racism and structural violence, such as we see being embedded in the Native Title Act, might be rethought - given that we know they provoke intense shame and therefore potentially violent defensive retreats when Indigenous voices can easily and legally be overridden. Different views that encompass a recognition of the need for lessening the burden of shame might facilitate

grieving and reparation. Interestingly Jones, in considering the role of shame in genocidal violence, warns about just that, ie, the need to modulate an upsurge of a need for revenge, while assuming responsibility to facilitate repair.

This point is made explicit in this last quote: *“the point of political humanisation is to include relevant social stakeholders in the public conversation. A good start will have been made when Aborigines are not discussed as objects of white policy.”* 34 Not being treated as objects invites dialogue and less shaming, and arguably lessens potentials for seeking revenge.

So at the end of this paper, I come back to the title at the beginning, and my reflections on a growing recognition internally. The title has a second meaning too, in that Growing Recognitions carries a sense of “an activity” – the activity of cultivating receptivity, here by thinking more about shame as a precursor to violence and the evacuation of unbearable feelings so that there might be space for a meeting of minds.

## Post Script

Since this paper was given, Australia held a national referendum in October 2023 based on furthering the aims of the Uluru Statement by Indigenous Elders – ie to be heard. The referendum failed, largely it seems because of the base politicisation of misinformation. One cannot foresee the future, but it would be a reasonable reading to acknowledge that those Elders were left feeling devastated and humiliated after so many years of crafting their ideas – those ideas having been formulated at the Government’s request. The general feeling of anger in younger activists is already being voiced. It is noteworthy that nowhere in the national commentary has there been much consideration of the impact of shame, together with its psychological consequences.

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