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## Just outside this skin

D. Celermajer

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## Just outside this skin

### **Abstract**

Imagine that white Australia is reclining (nervously) on Freud's couch.

Twitches a little and adjusts himself (with discomfort) against the Persian covered cushions.

What would the master of psychoanalysis make of his speech?

The conceit is, of course, absurd.

The couch would quickly splinter beneath the weight of the bodies which make up the fiction of 'white Australia'. And Sigmund (even in his younger years) wouldn't be able to decipher a single phrase for the confusion of voices.

But indulge nevertheless.

Take the voice that comes straight from mid-morning radio talk back; or the 'battler' who lives in politicians' speech notes.

## *Just Outside This Skin*

*Dany Celermajer*

*Annihilate* - completely destroy, make insignificant or powerless - make nothing (nihil, nothing, Latin);

*extinguish* - cause to die out, annihilate, render void;

*genocide* - the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a people;

*disavowal* - repression of an unacceptable truth or emotion, the most primitive form of psychological defence;

*terra nullius* - land belonging to no one.

Imagine that white Australia is reclining (nervously) on Freud's couch. Twitches a little and adjusts himself (with discomfort) against the Persian covered cushions.

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The conceit is, of course, absurd.

The couch would quickly splinter beneath the weight of the bodies which make up the fiction of 'white Australia'. And Sigmund (even in his younger years) wouldn't be able to decipher a single phrase for the confusion of voices.

But indulge nevertheless.

Take the voice that comes straight from mid-morning radio talk back; or the 'battler' who lives in politicians' speech notes.

He is the heart of Australia, and his future, we are told, depends on cleaning up this Mabo/Wik mess.

To make it easier - move the couch, the desk lamp, the leather chair and its occupant to Longreach. Western Queensland. The home of the Stockman's Hall of Fame.

A trip that far from the inner city will get rid of most of the lefty latte society. And if there are any hangers on when you get there, you can always shove the remnants off with a cattle prod.

Make room on the couch for the anti-Mabo brigade.

'Now - I want to get this perfectly straight. I'm not here because I want to be, you know.'

'Mmm.'

'The only reason I came is because I was forced to. One of those Macquarie Street city specialists - sixth doctor I've seen in fact - *he* said that it might be a good idea if I came to see you. I don't know why they can't just find the problem and cut the damn thing out.

'Tell you what - that's what I'd do. Cut the damn thing out... But no - years of training and between the whole lot of them they say 'there seems to be no physical cause for the symptoms'. Sick as a dog and that's the best they can do. All I can say is that it's lucky this country doesn't have to rely on turkeys like that.

'Never had a thing wrong with me before. But now if it's not one thing it's another. Not just me being sick and all, but the farm's gone to the dogs. The drought, the bank loans, government threatening to pull out on us, the damn

school fees - which those blacks don't have to pay mind you - that woman is absolutely right - special privileges - that's what's wrong with this country - and now, as if all that wasn't enough - these bloody claims from some black fellas who've never even been near my land.

'Not that I'd stop them - they've always been more than welcome to come along - but I never heard a single word until the do-gooder High Court stuck its nose where it doesn't belong.

'I can tell you - there'd've been none of this trouble if they'd just left well enough alone. Don't see what was wrong with the way it was before - I've lived on this land all my life. Just like my dad. The law says that it's ours and it's ours. And I've got the title to prove that.

'It's those jew lawyers and city blacks (don't look very black to me either) stirring up trouble. And now they've all got it into their head that they have some 'right' to this place. Never seen what they did for Australia. Who holds up the economy? You tell me that?

'What do they think the blacks would do with this land? Tell me that. Sit around and drink. Let those disease ridden dogs run around their kids. Paint themselves up like a mob of savages and sing some tuneless songs. Make didgeridoos. Do bugger all to develop the land.

Who do you think made this land what it is today? Before dad and got here you couldn't do a useful thing with this land. A big empty waste.

'Not to say anything about how we might feel. I love this place. It's the only home I know. My dad and mum lived here - I brought my kids up here - I've got a lifetime and more of memories on this place. Feel like I know it and it knows me. And now some mob thinks they can just march in here and take it away. They act as if we're not even here.'

The doctor also reclines and listens. His eyes narrow a little.

‘Who are these black people who want to take your home from you?’

‘What are you asking me that for? How am I meant to know who they are? They’re nothing to do with me. Most of them speak some foreign language. They act strangely. They’ve got totally unpronounceable names. I know nothing about them.’

(A silence seems to last some minutes.)

‘And if I asked them, what do you think they might say about you?’

He does not answer.

‘That’s all we have time for today. I will see you next week’.

In the quiet of the ill lit room, Herr Doktor opens his leather bound book and takes some notes.

What are his fantasies? And he muses.

He will not even let it into his mind that they may also be present, that they might also have eyes that look out to the world.

***Fetishism or 'Now you see it now you don't'***

In 'Fetishism', Freud explored this play between recognition and denial. His play was, as you might guess, set in the realm of the 'phallus' and castration. But indulge him also his excesses - he may still have something we can take back to Longreach.

If the child is to construct a stable sense of reality and himself (sic), he must be absolutely certain about the constitution of certain fixed points in his field. If those points move or change, the entire system is unhinged and the child's world begins to freely float away from him - taking his own ego with it. For the young child, the essential fixed point on his map is his mother - it is his mother who settles him.

According to Freud, this mother, around whom this child creates his world, has a penis or, in his own word, a 'phallus'. This phallus, the mother's phallus, is not a mere part of her anatomy, along with arms, legs and hair. It is the marker of her power. It is, like the mother herself, a fixed point on the map - and so constitutive of his reality.

So when, one day, he sees, that she does not in fact possess this phallus he thought she had, the sight is unsettling, vertiginous. He cannot allow it to be true.<sup>1</sup> Not simply because it would be confusing. Not simply because the world around him changes. Rather, because his anchor has become unhinged.

If he allows himself to recognise the truth of what appears before him, he has no choice. He must give up his reference point and, with it, his own place in the world. And for the child, as a still-fragile ego, this is tantamount to disintegration. His own sense of self is defined with reference to his mother

(the 'phallic mother'). If she is not what he thought she was, what does this say about him?

And this change in status, as we have noted, is not some insignificant anatomical readjustment. If she, the phallic mother, can lose her penis, his future must also be uncertain.

And uncertainty, we might remind ourselves, can be intolerable.

So, haunted by the prospect of this loss, he declares: 'No this cannot be true' (Freud 1977: 362).

In doing so, he creates a new, elaborate superstructure of psychological apparatus - one which accommodates paradox. He must somehow hold at bay what he has seen (disappear it from consciousness) and yet he must accommodate this new reality. 'He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up' (1977: 353).<sup>2</sup>

But still there is more. Where the phallus (which must be there, but can no longer be there) was, there now must be a substitute presence. This substitute will be invested with all the interest of the original object - and 'an extraordinary increase', because, '*the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of a substitute*' (1977: 353).

At the same time, the creation of a substitute creates an aversion - a memorial of the horror and the pain of the forbidden recognition. This is a fetish.

It was, in fact, Freud's musings on disavowal, that led him to question his original characterisation of the difference between neurosis and psychosis. The former, he had believed, involved no more than a repression of some aspect of reality - that is filing it in a remote part of the unconscious. The latter involved a detachment of a piece of reality. A refusal to encode it at any level. And yet in the case of the fetishist he had evidence of people who were not psychotic -



people who were, in all other respects, quite normal - who had managed this detachment from some aspect of reality.

What have we had to do to secure the denial of the perception that '*they were present*'?

Certainly we saw. How could we not have seen? But upon seeing we hurled the perception from consciousness. And in *their* place we established the name of the law. We gave the land a title. Our title.

And just witness the near psychotic outbreak we have seen when the fetish object - the title - is threatened. The rational commentary would explain away our fierce defense of title in terms of economics and identity. And certainly ownership of land feeds our industry and so our pockets and shapes our identity. But this is surely not sufficient an explanation for the kicking and screaming, the madness in the eyes and ranting speech. These symptoms are more reminiscent of our own possession than cool economic interest in our possessions.

Our desperate need to hold onto the title masks the original act of disavowal - an act that we cannot allow ourselves to acknowledge. For, like the little boy, if we did, we would lose our place in the world, and that world would become chaotic. Uncertain.

And perhaps even in the quality of aversion, it is like the fetish. For somewhere in this adulation of title, this deification of the pastoral, there is also a darker note. A horror. The resonance of a memory of displacement.

So in this speech that emanates from the couch the good Doktor reads the fetish, the detachment of a piece of reality. Disavowal. Annihilation.

What then would he say of a whole legal system that was founded on a detachment from reality?

Bucket loads of extinguishment<sup>3</sup> (a plenitude of emptiness?)

Flick Wik, be quick<sup>4</sup> (Like a fly - a petulance?)

Pauline wears the pants, Howard and Fischer, the petticoats.<sup>5</sup> (You just can't trust the girlies to take a hard line).

That this meeting rejects entirely the Prime Minister's ten point plan on native title and demands that this government introduce legislation totally extinguishing native title on all occupied lands in Australia, including all categories of pastoral lease. Total extinguishment, no compensation, no consultation, no compromise - only total extinguishment (*Courier Mail*, May 19 1997).

.....inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale...the Great Australian Silence; the story of the things we were unconsciously resolved not to discuss with them or treat with them about... (Stanner 1969)

Is this what we mean when we say he's the strong silent type?

***The other side***

When I went to school I was taught that Australia had been an 'empty land' when it was discovered by Captain Cook. It was a pretty strange thing for me because I'm Aboriginal. I knew my family had lived in Australia for thousands of years.<sup>6</sup>

I remember as a child holding my father's hand and looking up at red and ochre images of dry earth and skinny dark people. (I now recognise them as the tacky commercial paintings by non-Indigenous Australians that hung in tourist galleries.) And what I remember most distinctly was that these painting always showed footprints in the sand.

And now I wonder about our choice of iconography. Perhaps sand, with its propensity to shift and conceal was well chosen. For legally and politically, we have refused to encode the markings of another presence.

If we allowed ourselves down that track, where might we go?

If they are there and they also look out, how do they make the world?

If you look at me, will you steal my soul? Will I lose control? Will I be lost to myself?

If you look at me, you will steal my soul.

You look at me, and make me other than the self that I must be.

I lose my balance when you look at me and I stumble.

So I must disappear you and recreate the world in your absence.

If we fear the fall into this space away from ourselves, what might it be like to occupy that space? What if you are now the disavowed, the removed, the extinguished.

What does it feel like to be disappeared? What is the experience of having your individual, cultural, physical and political reality systematically annihilated?

What might it be like to walk and at every turn notice that you left no mark? Down through the muscles of your leg is the memory of movement and contact - but the evidence is disallowed. Disavowed.

What would that feel like?

We cannot know, because we have always been on this side.

### ***Falling***

And, surely, the way to think about consciousness that is adequate to itself is as a mode of modification of this awakening, this disruption which can never be absorbed, of the Same by the Other, in is difference. (Levinas 1989: 209)

In the tradition of Levinas, there are also those amongst us who yearn for otherness, not because it provides a trite day tour into the exotic. Rather, we are dissatisfied with the Romantic promise of a 'rationality which entailed the gathering together of the world's diversity within the unity of a single order that left nothing out' (Levinas 1989: 209). We long for the revelation which will rupture the self same and perforate this totality of presence. It is only the possibility of that which is absolutely other, that which we cannot assimilate into the engulfing oneness of Being which might lift us from the prison of banal completeness and self identity.

It is precisely what I fear that I crave in revelation. Yes, if I allow the look of the other to touch my consciousness, I might fall out of myself - hallelujah! What a relief to escape this room I have been walking around and around for as long as (there was an) I (that) can remember.

Should we not go beyond the consciousness which is equal to itself, seeking always to assimilate the Other and instead the act of deference to the other in his alterity, which can only come through the awakening of the Same - drowsy in his identity - by the Other? (Levinas 1989: 209)

There is another voice coming from the couch.

She giggles with delight (though nervously). She speaks of travel, not displacement; expansion, not disorientation.

She catches the gaze of the other. She traces the line of the gaze with her own eyes. And hup! She leaps up on it, and glides along to the other eyes. For a moment (just for a moment) she looks back and sees herself.

She is dizzy with the movement of her own mind. Taken from the mooring of her own post, she now looks around. Not just back at herself, but at the land and time and history. The freedom of disengagement from this obligatory perspective which she wears like a body is exhilarating. And there is more, she thinks. Just outside this skin.

### **Notes**

- 1 The use of Freud's discussion of castration in no way reflects the author's adherence to the theory of castration. It is used as a structural analogy only.
- 2 We might note that it is such processes, such insistence that reality be other than as it is, that is the basis of the splitting of consciousness.
- 3 The term used by Tim Fischer, the Deputy Prime Minister, to reassure farmers of what the government would deliver.
- 4 The banners at held by pastoralists at the meeting held by the Prime Minister at Longreach, Queensland, reported in "Howard's double dissolution stick", *The Sunday Herald Sun*, Sunday 18 May 1997.
- 5 Proposed motion prepared for the Longreach meeting, reported in "No movement at the stations as the PM makes his plea", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May 1997.
- 6 Michael McDaniel, member, National Native Title Tribunal, reported in "The Next Move?", *Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 1997.

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