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The Youth Inferno: Two-Way Working on Ancestral Lands

Pamela Nathan

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Abstract

In this article I present some of the work of Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment (CASSE) in Central Australia, Northern Territory, with the youth in the justice system, referring to our dual cultural and therapeutic program Shields for Living, Tools for Life. Psychoanalytic concepts and tools that have informed the work and transformed the trauma landscape are detailed. The work is at the epicenter of anger, concern, and politics in Central Australia and this epicenter has been named the “youth crisis.” It is a journey of feeling the heat, of being on a rollercoaster ride in a landscape of monstrous trauma where CASSE attempts two-way working.

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In this article I present some of the work of Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment (CASSE) in Central Australia, Northern Territory, with the youth in the justice system referring to our dual cultural and therapeutic program Shields for Living, Tools for Life. The work is at the epicenter of anger, concern, and politics in Central Australia and this epicenter has been named the “youth crisis.” It is a journey of feeling the heat, of being on a rollercoaster ride in a landscape of monstrous trauma where CASSE attempts two-way working.

Monstrous Trauma

Having seen Aboriginal people catapulted into a world of a traumatic pandemic crisis heralding contamination, lockdowns, threat, fear, death, and dispossession of daily life, we might say we now know something of their world. COVID-19 has thrust Black Lives Matter, ignited by the tragic, harrowing death of George Floyd, into the public arena with flashing life-and-death headlights, and now racism has center stage.

I will now take you on a brief journey of the monstrousness in Central Australia that provides the backdrop of our work at the frontline and makes clear why we use two-way working and why its use is imperative. The extraordinary can reveal potential horrors that can explode in the ordinary.

Kumanjayi Walker was a young Warlpiri man, in the justice system, who was fatally shot three times inside his house in the presence of his grandfather and the rest of his family at Yuendumu—a town 230 kilometers northwest of Alice Springs—in 2019. The emergency response team had been called in. At the time of the second and third shots, according to the contested evidence, the two officers “had control of him”: “He was face down on the ground, incapable of stabbing anyone, with an officer on top of him, and with his arm pinned under him, jammed up by a mattress.”¹ Kumanjayi did not want to return to detention. He breached his order for a minor crime by returning to his homeland in Yuendumu, three hundred kilometers from Alice Springs, and breaking his anklet monitor. A few days later I met a youth, Kumanjayi’s friend, who was next door at the time of the shooting and heard the shots, and his uncle, who was in Yuendumu for the family funeral. The shattered young man was mute, and his stoic uncle was minding him. The uncle muttered to me that his nephew had witnessed the “dragging” of the shot body, an act of dehumanizing callousness. According to the body-worn video, the bullet-ridden Kumanjayi Walker could be heard “softly crying, almost whimpering.”² A few days later, I was sitting in a creek bed in an adjoining community, talking with the young witness and other friends of the deceased. Supposedly I was talking about their rampaging damage to the police station; instead, I told them I felt a burning shame to be a Whitefella that day and they then gave voice and we shared talking. I wanted to claim the shame that could well have been felt deserved by them as youth lampooned in the youth crisis.

Two way implies reciprocity and equality, to be able to breathe and have a voice. But in a landscape of colonization that has bred violence, tormenting trauma, racial inequality, and the eclipsing of Aboriginal cultural life, asymmetrical, narcissistic power structures and relations that negate and oppress the Other dominate. Over the years, Aboriginal people tell us about their “hurting hearts”—that “you do not speak my language, but I speak yours”—of “weakened spirits” and of the need to “wake up strong.”

The agent of terror in trauma is monstrosity—the monstrous internal object. Gerhard Schneider says the traumatic situation can be an excess of stimuli impinging on the subject—a “too much” by which the internal monster, in an explosive, violent attack, actively destroys the representational world and the subject is crashed on and torn to pieces.³ This attack may be preceded by a “too little,” by being exposed to the absence of a resonant object where there should be one, and the result is the subject’s internal state of a nameless void, breaching the

protective shield and offering minimal coping resources. Being is then a Nothing, a No One, getting lost from the place of original Belonging—My Land.

The “too much” and the “too little” can lead to offending. There are clear links between trauma and offending. Youth report “feeling the heat in the watchhouse.” We know youth offend in the immediate aftermath of the “too much,” for example, the profound loss of relatives sustained in murderous fatalities with the “too little” being unable to name and process. The youth do not know what to do with the pain that smashes them on the inside and so they act out and smash their external worlds.

“Too much,” I think represents the tsunami, colonial racist past and its sequelae of ongoing trauma and “too little,” terra nullius and a terra nullius state of mind/Being. With colonialism came invasion, stolen lands and stolen children and massive dispossession of lands and culture. There has been a fight for belonging by the Whiteman, amplified by the declaration of terra nullius. I think the illegitimacy of this claim has been and remains the relational, narcissistic wound and injury that catalyzes and festers and violently explodes across the intersubjective racial divide and underpins and perpetuates the so-called youth crisis.

In the monstrous world of trauma, there can be invisible worlds reminiscent of the inferno and the escape of suffering Italo Calvino describes in his short book *Invisible Cities*:

The inferno of living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.⁴

The inferno becomes ordinary and taken for granted and almost unseen until something extraordinary erupts like murderous violence.

The transgenerational inferno is the real crisis and the backdrop to CASSE work and the world of Aboriginal people. The red center of Australia, the heart of Australia, is like a bleeding heart of lacerating pain, and the blood of those murdered and marginalized has hemorrhaged throughout the ancestral lands, seeping and congealing into the very foundations of the nation of Australia, which has been built on an oedipal crime, a colonial crime, and a crime against humanity. It has been largely a country of soul murder and not a country of soul making. Fearful rage silenced and silences lament. The inferno is the harsh, unseen, veiled, daily crisis reality of the youth and can be encountered daily.

A twelve-year-old recently waved me down and asked me for a lift to his town camp. And then he asked for the water he saw in the vehicle. He told me the security guard at a twenty-four-hour youth program had asked him to leave for “giving cheek.” He said: “[I have] been walking all night. Up all night. I am so tired.” Then he said: “I am so fed up. Fed up.” He fell asleep in the car as we reached the perimeter of the camp. He looked so small and young. He told me he was in upper primary school. He sounded like a weary, despairing old man.

Our assessments show that most youth engaged in the Shields for Living, Tools for Life program have undiagnosed depression and anxiety, revealing that these youth are psychologically distressed. These youth tell us they offend because they “feel scared, stressed and angry, insecure and unsafe, uncared for” and some offend just because they are “hungry.” They tell us they grow up with grog, gambling, hunger, humbug, fights, brothers and fathers doing gaol time or dead too soon.

Trauma Landscape: Background on the Youth

Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a long history of overrepresentation in the youth and adult justice systems across Australia.

The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory identified the stark fact that the Northern Territory has the highest rate of children and young people in the juvenile justice system (as well as in child protection services) in this country by a considerable margin.

Of the children and young people in detention in the Northern Territory:

- 94 percent are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander,
- 28 percent are fifteen years and under to age ten (aged ten!), and
- 80 percent are male.⁵

The Royal Commission identified that the unusually high rates of incarceration and child protection of indigenous youth could not be separated from experiences of intergenerational trauma.⁶ The Royal Commission also identified that the youth detention system is likely to leave many children and young people more damaged than when they entered, causing further compounding trauma.⁷

The high rates of suicide, psychological distress, and mental illness experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people is well documented. According to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescent and youth health and well-being report, a considerable proportion of indigenous people aged fifteen to thirty-four (33 percent) reported high to very high levels of psychological distress.⁸ It states that a strong connection to culture and country has a central role in ensuring the good health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In 2021, the Northern Territory government introduced new legislation that has essentially removed bail possibilities for youth and increased the likelihood of detention. This legislation has been strongly opposed by Aboriginal organizations and supporters. The legislation is not in keeping with the recommendations of the Royal Commission.

CASSE

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

Since 2011, CASSE has facilitated and developed several collaborative programs determined and directed by Aboriginal organizations and communities and has worked closely with the police, the Northern Territory government, and other stakeholders, including the justice system. We have held town and organizational forums and conferences and presented in international and national forums, promoting dialogue about the need for recognition of the racial and cultural divide and of trauma and losses and about the need for programs that promote couple and family integration. We have delivered workshops on trauma, suicide, violence, and psychoanalytic tools.

Shields for Living, Tools for Life



Warlpiri youth on a cultural healing camp near Willowra

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

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



The Men's Tjilirra Movement (MTM) in the Western Desert

SFLTFL takes high-risk youth from custody to country, providing a dual therapeutic and cultural program; the therapeutic is found in cultural traditions. *Tjilirra*, which includes the number 7, boomerangs, spears, and shields, are traditional tools of hunting, ceremony, Aboriginal Dreamtime, and law that were confiscated under Western law, which classified them as weapons. The men of the Western Desert report that *tjilirra* are a source of pride, cultural survival, and emotional well-being:

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

The youth are taught by their elders, “in language,” who “give their knowledge” to make traditional tools, care for country, have conversations with the elders, tell sacred song-line stories, and talk about gaol time.



Ngangkari-Walter Juggadai at Ikuntji holding a *tjilirra*



Cultural Consultant Robert Hoosan shaping a spear



Youth searching for the appropriate *mulga* at a cultural healing camp in Central Australia



Youth shaping spears and no. 7s

The youth use old tools to make new tools for living. They are given agency using Western tools to make law and ceremony tools. The men tell their story “in memory” (of grandfathers) and talk about their troubles and the “problem life.” The men and youth are encouraged to talk about the challenges of living in two worlds and about the trauma they have endured and acted out. As part of developing their narratives, the men discover old song lines and waterholes and are emotionally moved by the aliveness of the dreaming. As MJ, a *ngangkari* (traditional healer), says, “Making *tjilirra* is special—it is the spirit of our grandfather inside you.”

SFLTFL is a cultural healing program working with relatedness, family, and country and acknowledging their importance.⁹ As Fred Myers points out in his seminal work, there is no self without kin.¹⁰ The identity of self is embedded in mutual relations with others, with the *tjukurrpa*, Aboriginal Dreamtime or from the Dreaming, and “one’s story” derived from ownership and narrative of “named place,” and with it are song lines and sacred objects, making it “That’s his story.”¹¹ Geographical location, the places where events occurred, punctuates any narrative, and sacred spaces and places entail stories and movements of ancestral beings. One’s

own country, *ngurru walytja*, is a place of security and belonging.¹² Being on country is about direct ancestral connections. The emotional world is inextricably linked to the *Tjukurrpa* and to country. Sorrow can be heralded at times of ceremony or ritual. Celebration is evoked by being on country, holding country, and dancing on country.¹³ *Kanyininpa* (holding) is a key cultural value in cultural healing—the land holds and links *walytja*, *ngurru*, and *Tjukurrpa*.



The young children and youth in a ceremonial dance at Papunya

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



Youth playing with light at night at a cultural healing camp

The program now is operating one day a week in the Youth Detention Centre in Alice Springs. We also have a site one kilometer outside of Alice Springs at Desert Knowledge on a large bush block with a *wiltja* (traditional shelter) and bring youth from town and town camps for day camps on country. We are seeking funding for this program to continue and to develop a permanent site at Ulborra five hundred kilometers from Alice Springs for longer- term camps.

The How-Psychoanalytic Concepts and Tools

Several psychoanalytic concepts inform the work of CASSE and provide a foundation to navigate and transform the emotional turbulence, uncertainty, and psychic dread associated with profound trauma.¹⁴ Such concepts can be applied to two-way community work to promote new ways of recognizing and responding to emotional experience, assisting team members and collaborators to process their own emotional experiences through intense and challenging psychological work.

We use W. R. Bion's elaboration of caesura, which suggests a model for rising above every rupture to find the continuity that exists between seemingly dissimilar yet connected states of mind, events, and persons.¹⁵ Bion underlines the critical importance of attending to the gaps, breaks, and oppositions because these are where emotional aliveness resides, but also where the threat of drowning loiters. Bion asks us to be in the eye of the storm.¹⁶

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

"Sorry business" and ceremonial life can engender the depressive mode of mourning, and concern, and repair and family life can be strengthened. The SFLTFL both recognizes and facilitates the Aboriginal notions of holding on country and the country holding the people and holding the spirit strong. The holding of the country camps on ancestral lands equate to "the

Land is Mother,” and the eternality of *Tjukurrpa* found on country ensures continuity in space and time.

Related is the concept of radical doubt, referring to the achievement of truth through emotional experiencing.¹⁷ Radical doubt shifts the focus of thinking from content, absolutes, and outcomes to dreaming, processes, relationships, differences, and movement.¹⁸ A position of radical doubt has been very helpful to maintain in the face of philanthropic and government funding bodies who want to know outcomes before committing to funding a program. I believe that CASSE can show that outcomes are embedded in the process.

D. W. Winnicott warns us about knowing too much. Traumatic experiences that lead to primitive defenses can belong to the threat to the isolated core, the threat of its being found, altered, and communicated with.¹⁹ Therefore, as therapists, Winnicott underlines, our most important responsibility is to recognize the power we possess to violate the person’s sacred core by knowing too much rather than waiting, in silence and stillness, for the patient/youth to creatively discover.²⁰

Radical hope, a concept coined by Jonathan Lear, anticipates a good outcome for those who hold hope but so far lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it—a future yet to be articulated.²¹ This concept can be effectively applied to crises of cultural collapse, where notions of the good life—a future with meaning—may be unfathomable. Radical hope provides an alternative to making predeterminations and solutionizing, which inevitably fail. I think the youth on cultural camps experience the hope that they are not seen to be bad or mad and that however catastrophic their experiences, there is hope their sadness can be understood and that they will find new possibilities.

The dreaming tracks of the psychoanalytic journey, one might say, have enabled CASSE to discover and pinpoint a primary source of real health described by Winnicott, which is the feeling of real.²² Feeling real, in the face of catastrophic psychic trauma, heralds survival and emotion at the heart of thinking.²³ Feeling real may not be measurable. CASSE has worked in the space of lived, real, alive experiences with the belief that this state of being gives rise to new and uncharted possibilities and two-way modes of being.

The principle of recognition is important in working with the effects of intergenerational trauma. Recognition is as important to life as oxygen. A lack of recognition heralds a nobody’s land state of *terra nullius*—and a nobody state of mind becomes sovereign. Recognition is about validation of Being. In T. H. Ogden’s view, psychoanalysis is a lived emotional experience in which recognition facilitates the patient’s capacity to “dream”—or do psychological work with—emotional experience in the service of psychic growth.²⁴ Recognition is about the Other and mutual empathy. CASSE has endeavored throughout to provide a facilitating environment that fosters and recognizes what is important to Aboriginal people and the youth, thus expanding meaning, deepening belonging, and allowing representation to fill the void of the “too little.” The *tjilirra* is also a metamorphic object, an object of recognition.

Working in a community context necessarily shifts the focus from an intrapsychic world to an external sociocultural world, though the focus shifts back and forth in a dialectic relationship between the internal and the external. The object is to maintain an analytic stance in all facets of the work. Psychoanalysis can be very practical. Though we do not work on the couch, the consulting room can be considered equivalent on country where “Land is Mother.” As for myself, when I talk to traditional owners about CASSE work or about how I might help, in my consulting room, wherever it might be, I introduce myself in relation to my kin, in central Australia, as Naparulla, and the work I have done with Japanangka, so they know I know, that I have a place and that I am not a stranger to the story of their hurting hearts.

To facilitate two-way therapy, CASSE privileges cultural experiences and differences and recognizes the containing and creative possibilities they provide. Here, the notion of transitional or potential space, a term coined by Winnicott that refers to an intermediate area of

experiencing, is relevant.²⁵ In this space, between the inner and outer world, which is also the space between people (the transitional space), intimate relationships and creativity occur. Culture is essential for survival and a sense of belonging, having a place and an identity; the language of the soul is both emotional and cultural.

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

We have not perceived Aboriginal people to be the problem but considered, in the words of W. E. H. Stanner, how Whitefellas might be a problem for Aboriginal people and then considered what are the problems for Aboriginal people.²⁶ As Whitefellas we have tried to reflect throughout on how we can deconstruct colonialist ways of being and relating between ourselves and in the work, where relevant, subject ourselves and our relations to scrutiny and to dialogue among ourselves, with others, and with Aboriginal people. We have tried to facilitate programs that equalize power in the facilitation of wants and the co-creation and co-delivery of programs, facilitate genuine communication and local knowledge, and promote storytelling.

Because Aboriginal people/youth and communities are victims of colonial dispossession, one cannot work with them without feeling the impact of their trauma. Further, the recurring dynamic of rising hope and crashing disappointment that feeds turbulent, raging, violent feelings that culminate in despair depicts a fundamental state of mind and reality for Aboriginal people in these communities. Effective work in the context of trauma and its consequences involves the deliberate use of oneself as an instrument of healing. Accordingly, countertransference—one's living response to another's emotional state at any given moment and empathic attunement to the person's experience of trauma and its sequelae—is the community worker's greatest asset and greatest liability. Deep listening is required, and rapport can be furthered. To work effectively with those who have been traumatized, one must be willing to enter their experience, be empathically attuned to the terror, shame, vulnerability, rage, and loss, and enter the disconnection and disempowerment that comes with trauma and be able to reflect, process, and return to one's own skin. To truly feel with the Aboriginal communities that we work with inevitably expands who we are. But such work can at the same time place us in harm's way, for example, by leaving us feeling overwhelmed or experiencing vicarious traumatization or enacting the countertransference.

Our perspective on such countertransferential responses is to consider their role as testimonies to the pain of the people/youth, to their reverberating humiliations, and the legacies of colonization.²⁷ As with countertransference reactions in psychotherapy, some essential truths may be conveyed through such feelings, yet in social and community work, these countertransferences are situated in the legacies and caesuras of "violent" colonial contact and the racial divide. By listening to stories and the retellings of emotional experiences, such as I did that day with the youth in the aftermath of the death of Kumanjayi Walker, one can deepen understandings and connections.



The author listening to the youth at Willowra

Here, I think, is an example of how the pain of the fatality could be suffered together and how in the face of recognition and ownership by a Whitefella who is honoring past violence and collective trauma, the youth were enabled to find their voice. My brief had been to talk to them about the violence they committed against the police station, which pales in comparison morally to the terrible death of their friend. The pain of the youth was palpable. I told them about what the uncle had said about the fate of their friend after he had been shot. The youth spoke, in turn, about how the police had left the community, handing out lollies, leaving them to feel bad. They spoke about the Coniston massacre in 1928, in which many of their past relatives had been murdered nearby. It was a deeply moving encounter with the youth, and they and the elders with them were surprised by the receptive, suffering Other bearing witness on their behalf, excavating and naming the truth of the real violence, differentiating between the deserting Other, caring for them, feeling for them, and they, in turn, were able to root their feelings in representations of the past.

Conclusion

In the inferno, in the monster world of trauma, for the youth who are its casualties, CASSE has endeavored to contain the “too much” and to fill the “too little” with stories and hope. In two-way working, CASSE seeks to replace fear with hope and deadness with aliveness, transforming extraordinary, catastrophic darkness to light the ordinary with companionship, compassion, resilience, and reflection. We have sought to recognize that the youth are not the inferno and to give them space and facilitate endurance. Over these ten years, CASSE has become a trusted organization. Aboriginal people now recognize CASSE as a trusted container that can hold the good and the bad, bear the pain and deposit trust in the Other and catalyze change.²⁸ In a landscape of trauma, the psychoanalytic frame has been fundamental to enabling the work to endure and to empower.



Two youth feeling empowered with their *tjilirra* they made

Notes

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- ³ Gerhard Schneider, “Trauma as a Monstrous Quasi-Object,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 100 (2019): 1187.
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- ⁶ Ibid., 35.
- ⁷ Ibid., 3.
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- ¹¹ Ibid., 91.
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- ¹³ Ibid., 111.
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- ¹⁸ Civatarese, “Caesura as Bion’s Discourse on Method.”
- ¹⁹ D. W. Winnicott, “Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites,” in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, 179–192 (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), 186.
- ²⁰ Ibid., cited in T. H. Ogden, “The Feeling of Real: On Winnicott’s “Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 99 (2018): 1297.
- ²¹ Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope. Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008)
- ²² Winnicott, “Communicating and Not Communicating,” cited in Ogden, “Feeling of Real.”
- ²³ Bion, *Elements of Psychoanalysis*.
- ²⁴ T. H. Ogden, “Destruction reconceived: On Winnicott’s ‘The Use of an Object and Relating through identifications,’” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 97 (2016): 1260.

²⁵ T. H. Ogden, "On Potential Space," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 66 (1985): 129–141.

²⁶ W.E.H. Stanner, "After the Dreaming: Black and White Australians; An Anthropologists View," paper presented at the Boyer Lecture, Australian Broadcasting Company, Sydney, 1968.

²⁷ D. V. Volkan, "Psychoanalysis and Diplomacy: Part I. Individual and Large Group Identity," *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 1 (1999): 29–55.

²⁸ Enrique Pichon Rivière, "The Link and Theory of the Three Ds (Depositant, Depository, and Deposited): Role and Status," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 98 (2017): 177, DOI: 10.1111/17458315.12519.