

Deep Donkey and Dadirri - asking Creatura out to play

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Abstract

This article is based on the premise that we are currently awakening to the full systemic impact of the emerging global ecological crisis which is already having a devastating effect on the ecosystems of the earth and also a highly destructive impact on psychological well-being. The ecological crisis has coincided with the painful awakening to the social and environmental destruction that has resulted from the legacy of a colonial world view of nature and culture. These events now demand a radical and deep adaption of our view of nature and culture. It is becoming clear that we are facing not only an ecological break down and a narrative collapse, but also a breakdown in how to make sense of what we are facing. This article explores how systemic psychotherapy and Gregory Bateson's work on the gnostic ideas of pleroma and creatura, can provide a framework to support the Decolonial Turn but also an EcoSystemic Return. This article uses the children's game of Donkey and the Indigenous Australian practice of *Dadirri* to playfully explore how we might overcome Bateson's notion of epistemological error when engaging with systemic practice, Indigenous nature practice and quantum physics. The article suggests an imaginary game of *Deep Donkey* to overcome the destructive legacy of Cartesian dualism at the core of western culture and to begin to open western imagination to an intra-subjective dialogue with nature. I suggest the game of *Deep Donkey* could a helpful practice in realigning western thinking with sophisticated and long subjugated Indigenous ecological and cultural wisdom.

Donkey - learning to play with a socially constructed order in a Newtonian world

When I was about ten years old we used to go on holiday in the UK with our complicated 1970s state-of-the-art trailer tent that unfolded into a sort of camping house. We stayed in campsites in Cornwall and Scotland. Before the days of the internet, mobile phones and signs that said, “no ball games”, children would gather and find things to do. One of the games we played was a ball game called “Donkey”.

This game involved throwing and catching a tennis ball against the faded yellow concrete render of the windowless, gable end of the shower block. The aim of this game was to create a rhythm as we each threw the ball and let it bounce once against the wall and once on the ground before catching it with one hand. Throw-bounce-bounce-catch, throw-bounce-bounce-catch, throw-bounce-bounce-catch. We each stepped up in turn to try and catch the ball. This game was played out within the ruthless social learning hierarchy of pre-adolescent children. The game required a rigorous intensity of concentration to keep the rhythm going to “keep the kettle boiling”. The name “Donkey” derives from the social shaming process of objectifying and othering of anyone who failed to keep the order or rhythm and dropped the ball. One miss and you became a “D” the second miss a “DO” and so on until the ultimate shame of dropping the ball six times to become “Donkey”. Game over.

I learnt a lot from these simple games about social expectations, turn taking, gender, age and class, but also Euclidian geometry. It was essential to watch carefully where the ball might fall after any throw, how its bounce might change if it hit a broken area of wall render or a patch of gravel on the ground. This required focused attention to keep my uncoordinated, pre-adolescent male body in position to catch the ball with one hand and remembering, who was next, who had dropped the ball and how many times I had dropped it to avoid becoming the dreaded “Donkey”!

In the early 1970s, the Western World was obsessed with space travel, labour saving gadgets and germ-killing chemicals, commercial spinoffs of the space programme. Science had come of age and was secretly preparing all of us to leave the earth behind and explore this exciting new “final frontier”. However, I had a deep connection with the natural world and had developed a strong felt sense of the importance of just listening to nature that seemed to silently be communicating its beauty and mysteries to me in a way I could not articulate. I spent a lot of time outside just being, looking and listening, in a pleasant but slightly dissociated state. As a budding young naturalist, I didn’t really have a framework to understand what I was experiencing, but it was obvious to all concerned that, due to this nature connection, I would become a biologist. As I delved deeper into my natural history books, the rules of science and ways of understanding biology became clear, just experiencing nature was not really OK. Science was a *Game of Nouns*, a way of knowing through organising into a taxonomy of biological units and genetic memes where survival was the highest goal. This implicit message was clear, there was no room for a felt sense in biology, that was the realm of artists, who deluded themselves with imaginations of things that could not be objectified or measured in science’s clean Newtonian, Cartesian world - they had really dropped the ball on reality and were well on the way to “Donkey”. As my studies progressed, it became clear that nature was in deep trouble and although biological sciences evidenced this, then as now, they had little to offer in the way of practical help other than further study. Concern for environmental issues in those days was fringed with a touch of madness. This was not a real-world game, and these issues would be solved by the miracle of unfolding technology, super crops and chemical fertilisers would feed the world, maybe we could even genetically modify plants? And besides we could always go to the Moon or Mars.

Nearly fifty-years on as we recycle our exponentially increasing mountains of waste, environmentalism has become mainstream, and it is unequivocally clear that we are facing an unfolding ecological catastrophe (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021). The global pandemic seems to be the latest iteration in a series of emerging and unsettling ecological disasters and as we wake up to the systemic fragility of our world, it is clear we need a radical and deep adaption of our current perspective (Bendell, 2020). This has coincided with a painful awakening to the legacy of the social and environmental destruction resulting from a colonial world view of nature and culture.

In this article I hope to explore how an understanding of some of Bateson's original ideas at the core of systemic thinking, particularly his idea of understanding *creatura*, might help systemic psychotherapists navigate a way forward that addresses the need for both a Decolonial Turn and an EcoSystemic Return within systemic psychotherapy (Ndlovu, 2014).

Systemic thinking

After years of working with adolescents in nature as a woodland manager, wilderness camp leader and vision fast guide, and trying to integrate art and science into an understanding of nature, training as a systemic psychotherapist seemed like an exciting way forward (Duncan, 2018). I thought this might be a way of exploring the complexity of the human mind through psychotherapy and also promised to link this thinking with the equally complex and parallel process of understanding nature. As a biologist I was attracted to the field through the work of Gregory Bateson who famously suggested the problems of the world were a result of the difference between the way people think and the way nature actually works (in Bateson, 2010).

Gregory Bateson pointed to the root of the problem as an *epistemological error* within the western way of thinking about psychiatry and biology (Bateson, 1979). He believed that this error, at the core of modernist, materialist, scientific world view, originated in the Cartesian split that separated the world into objects and subjects, and which has had disastrous consequences for both nature and non-western cultures.

To overcome this error, Gregory Bateson suggested using the old Gnostic idea of separating the world in a different way by looking at the world through the two separate lens of *pleroma* and *creatura* (Bateson and Bateson, 2004). The lens or gaze of *pleroma* identifies the physical and first order aspects of nature, the domain of production, of how to be effective in the Newtonian, logical and physical world (Lang et al., 1990). Seeing the world through the lens of *pleroma* is essential if we need to master science, technology and run a global capitalist system, and this first order view is implicit in the game of Donkey.

However, observing the world through the lens of *creatura* reveals a completely different ontological perspective that is more aligned with indigenous cultural perspectives, where the gaze is towards patterns within living systems and interactions that do not necessarily manifest physically or even conceptually in the Newtonian world at all. Donna Haraway's (2016) account of the Navaho blanket weavers illustrates this difference. Navaho blankets were identified as potential objects of trade in the 1930s, seen with the gaze of *pleroma*, the relationship with the weavers, the delicate balance of the sheep and the landscape remained invisible. This is still the case with this way of seeing today where the relationship to production processes and disposal of products remains invisible if we look only through the lens of *pleroma*. Economic pressure undermined these invisible *creatural* relationships.

However, for the Navaho women their gaze was through the lens of *creatura*. The ancient process of weaving was all about relationships, stories, matriarchal lineages, patterns, plant dyes, sheep, and landscape. Navaho weaving was not about production but a daily situated ceremony of connection and interrelatedness, an emergent interactive “cosmological performance” that “embodied the worldmaking and world sustaining of relationships”. A performance not in the container of the world, but of the world, as it is continually storied into dynamic substance in a *creatural* process (Haraway, 2016, p. 91). Through the lens of *creatura*, we can observe the self-healing systemic complexity shared by both nature and the human mind, which can appear at first chaotic; however, Bateson insists *creatura* has its own language or grammar which can be learnt through careful observation (Bateson, 1979). Learning to see this *creatural* aspect of nature requires a patient hermeneutic process of deep listening, of learning “this curious language which has no things in it only difference and relationships” (Bateson and Bateson, 2004, p. 191).

The Milan group of psychiatrists appear to be the first therapists to take Gergory Bateson’s idea seriously and began to develop ways of thinking that were not implicitly structured by modernism and Cartesian dualism. They encouraged a non-expert stance and the cultivation of curiosity in the face of ideas about diagnosis, and they developed the practice of circular questions in clinical settings to identify patters in the relationships between people (Selvini Palazzoli et al., 1980; Cecchin, 1987). The work of the Milan group began to move the focus to a whole systems approach to families and social problems, which forty years on is still a novel idea in some areas of medicine, education, and social care.

Systemic psychotherapy continued to rise to Bateson’s rigorous challenge by embracing post-modernist ideas within psychotherapy by exploring the tyranny of language that trapped thinking in a pleromal world view from which point the subtlety of *creatura* remains invisible (Becvar and Becvar, 1999). Systemic therapies have usefully explored how both therapists and clients might become organised by dominant narratives that tend to subjugate less obvious and more subtle and complex stories that remain unspoken and unrecognised, arising from the ineffable matrix of the *creatura* (White and Epston, 1990; Anderson and Goolishian, 1992). The systemic practice of reflexivity borrows from the laws of geometry that govern optics. This has been used to scaffold thinking to help see events from different perspectives, or different positions, by moving the mirror, as it were (Tomm, 1987). Systemic psychotherapy is a well-established method of engaging with complexity and has been used helpfully to approach issues of clinical risk (Mason, 1993), as well as diversity, race and gender (Burnham, 2011) but the depth of Bateson’s contribution is still poorly understood (Launer, 2001; Palmer, 2021).

Bateson’s elusive challenge of finding the patterns that connect nature and the human mind has, however, been explored within the field of *ecopsychology*. The term *ecopsychology* was popularised by Theodore Roszak in the early 1990s which he defined as an “emerging synthesis of ecology and psychology and the skilful application of ecological insights to the practice of psychotherapy” (Roszak, 1992). *Ecopsychology* has a focus on the healing of the alienation between humans and nature and encourages us to live a more sustainable life and develop a more mature and ethical sense of responsibility toward the natural world, as well as decolonising our relationship with indigenous cultures (Fisher, 2019). Decolonising demands a reimagining the dominant western world view and part of the challenge of engaging with this process is the painful realisation that a colonial world view is deeply embedded in the very structural epistemology and ontology of western culture. Maldonado-

Torres describes the Decolonial Turn as being able to move away from the belief that we need to have a western subject to validate experiences (Maldonado-Torres, 2004). Changing the colonial position requires a radical rethink of our western world view and a move beyond the mere logic of western ideas. It necessitates not only a more systemic perspective but also the possibility of seeing the complexity of nature and mental health through the lens of indigenous knowledge systems (Ndlovu, 2014). It also involves a deep rethink of the very structure of the western culture, and language, the water in which a culture swim. It requires an acknowledgement that “western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic” or *WEIRD* culture has subjugated and destroyed most other world views (Diamond, 2012, p. 8). The Decolonial Turn needs more than mere inclusivity of diversity of non-white and non-western subjects within the western social and political structures, but a radical opening and acceptance of the intrinsic values of previously subjugated Indigenous peoples’ world views.

Dadirri and Indigenous knowledge systems

Both psychotherapeutic and ecopsychological ideas about nature and culture are very new fields of study in western culture. However, this work of connecting nature and culture has been practiced by indigenous cultures for a very long time and it is now essential to understand how these issues have been approached by non-western peoples. The culture of Indigenous peoples in Australia is at least 40,000 years old, according to western science. However, the knowledge passed on by word of mouth within Indigenous peoples in Australia suggests that the culture has engaged in the practice of connecting with the spiritual in nature continually for the last 100,000 years.

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, Indigenous Australian artist and educator has shared a nature-connection practice called *Dadirri*, a hermeneutic approach to the beauty of nature through deep listening (Ungunmerr, 2021). She describes this as essential for the mental health and well-being of Indigenous Australian people in order to connect with the land or “*country*” as well as the ancestors. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr shared this knowledge in the understanding that it does not belong to Indigenous Australian people alone, but to all peoples and cultures who have forgotten this connection with their own indigenous heritage. However, when this way of knowing nature was first shared by Indigenous Australian people with western colonial settlers it was translated into English as “*the dreaming*” based on their limited understanding of its complexity - it was just a dream. More recently, Tyson Yunkaporta, an Indigenous Australian artist and scholar retranslated “the dreaming” from the original Indigenous Australian language as “Suprarational interdimensional ontology endogenous to custodial ritual complexes” (Yunkaporta, 2021, p. 19). It is worth reading this a few times to grasp the complexity of this Indigenous ontology which shows a sophistication of understanding of the natural world rarely seen in western thinking (Shepard, 1998).

Galina Angarova, the United Nations Indigenous spokesperson, describes how she witnessed as a child the breakdown of her Indigenous Siberian culture and language in the Lake Baikal region of Russia. She describes how her own tribe were particularly skilled at embracing western values and education and now are highly overrepresented in the professional classes of the region. However, she understands this as a “trauma response” to the speed of their cultural dislocation and how in losing their ancient cultural way of life they quickly embraced the soul-numbing comfort of western epistemology in response to the grief of their loss (Angarova, 2020).

In contrast, the authors of “Reclaiming Youth at Risk”, have very successfully applied ancient indigenous knowledge systems to address contemporary social and emotional issues within their “youth at risk” programmes in the United States. They use an 15,000-year-old Lakota developmental mapping tool called the “Circle of Courage” (Brendtro et al., 2009). This work focuses on the essential foundation of attachment and belonging, not only to our parents, but also to family, tribe, culture and nature itself and how the loss of any one of these layers of nested hierarchies of attachment is detrimental to mental health. The “Circle of Courage” model builds on a secure attachment which then supports the skills of mastery, autonomy, and the highest cultural goal, not survival, but altruism.

The Australian Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders’ well-being programme, “Gayaa Dhuwi”, in a similar way to reclaiming youth at risk, is working with indigenous wisdom to address current social and mental health issues (Gayaa Dhuwi “*Proud Spirit*” Australia). Gayaa Dhuwi recognises seven stages of attachment as essential to Indigenous peoples’ mental health and social well-being. These are: mind, body, family, community, culture, country, and ancestors.

This indigenous mental health provision describes a complex, multi-layered attachment system that focuses not only on the mind, but also on the role of the body; the wider kinship group; the culture of arts and practical skills; and language and storytelling for knowledge transmission. This system also extends to a connection with nature through the practice of *Dadirri*, deep listening to the spirit of the land, as well as the essential role in well-being played by the relationship with ancestors in the dream time.

Rowen White, a Mohawk seed-keeper describes finding herself dislocated from her cultural Mohawk heritage and her journey of recovering her sense of belonging and reconnecting through gardening. White rediscovered her deep sense of tribal identity through collecting and learning to grow traditional Mohawk varieties of maize seed. White calls her journey an “apprenticeship to the Corn Mother” and believes connecting with the earth through growing food is a way for all broken tribal groups including western culture, which she calls “The diaspora of the disconnected” could be restored and reconnected with the earth (White & Hemphill, 2021).

Malidoma Patrice Somé from the Dagara tribe in West Africa states that true healing comes when the individual remembers their identity and their purpose, chosen in the world of ancestral wisdom, and reconnects with the world of Spirit (Somé, 1995). The Dagara, like many indigenous cultures, see children as Returning ancestors who have come with a clear intent, and the role of the Elders within the community is to awaken these young people to their mission which they have mostly forgotten by the time they reach adolescence. The Tibetan Book of the Dead, which is a very ancient source of indigenous knowledge, describes this process of reincarnation in detail and suggests spiritual practices for the living and dying to negotiate, not only a conscious passage through the afterlife, but also guidance on how to identify and enter a womb into which they will be reborn in the next life (Coleman and Jimpa, 2005). Anyone who has looked into the eyes of a new-born child might sense that we are encountering an ancient “being”, trailing deep history and holding an intent for a future beyond the imagination of its parents, despite the lack of a coherent narrative within modernist western culture to support this.

Letting go of Donkey

Thinking about these indigenous ideas from within a western epistemology, we might immediately begin to look for evidence of their truth and how it fits into our worldview. But it is possible to hold this knowledge lightly and playfully. Engaging with “The Decolonial Turn” does not ask us to mindlessly “culturally appropriate” and cherry pick indigenous knowledge systems to support failing western lifestyles as western culture is already at a stage of “narrative collapse” (Schmachtenberger, 2020). The WEIRD semantic narrative is beginning to go into free fall, and we are well beyond the notion of “safe uncertainty” (Mason, 1993). “The Decolonial Turn” requires us to turn the western cultural view on its head and see the hubris in western reductionist thinking for dismissing the value of these vast indigenous knowledge systems, which unlike western science (Sheldrake, 2012) have been moderated by tens of thousands of years of transgenerational mutual learning, a process that transforms this information into what Nora Bateson refers to as “warm data” (Bateson, 2020).

As a cisgender, white male, my adoption at the age of two months, from a white Canadian family into a white British family in the 1950s, appeared to go quite well. Adoption is, however, a first order solution for a very deep systemic attachment issue. Over the years, I have realised that my adoption left me with a general mistrust of human relationships and of most first order western cultural narratives. However, I did develop a deep body-based fascination with patterns of communication in nature and later, a strong identification with indigenous cultural perceptions and descriptions of our relationship with the natural world. This experience and my subsequent research have led me to the idea that we were all once Indigenous people and that this deeper knowledge already exists within WEIRD culture, and it is our birth rite to claim back our own lost and stolen indigenous ways of knowing. If you are reading this as a European and wondering about the endemic legacy of colonisation, you might want to ask yourself what tribes you originate from and what were your tribes’ language and how and when this knowledge was lost.

The current Western view of nature continues to be dominated by a modernist biological narrative of Darwinian evolution. A socially constructed world view of nature, based on survival that requires a successful subject and an unfit object to be understood, an idea at the basis of social Darwinism that has provided the implicit justification for a colonial world view. Although the conjuring trick of projecting the Victorian social struggle for existence on to nature and then identifying this struggle as fact, was exposed by Friedrich Engels as long ago as 1875 (Barad, 2007, p. 496). This modernist paradigm was more recently repackaged as *The New Synthesis* which understood the world by dividing it into discreet autonomous objective building blocks such as, organisms, organs, genes and ecosystems, all carefully and strictly described and measured using the pleromal language of image and concepts (Dawkins, 1986). However, to understand ecopsychology in these uncertain times invites a new way of understanding nature, a move from objectification, separation and disconnection to one of stewardship and kinship care (Salmon, 2015).

Feminist philosopher and biologist, Donna Haraway and biologist, Merlin Sheldrake both conclude that the current narrative of biology is no longer adequate to describe the complexity of nature that is now emerging, which is much more symbiotic, un-boundaried and entangled than previously imagined (Haraway, 2016; Sheldrake, 2021). As we gradually wake up to the complexity of the ecological catastrophe, it is clear we have reached the limits of a modernist approach to nature.

Karen Barad, a feminist physicist and philosopher, challenges the very notion of our Newtonian reality and the delusion of Cartesian separation and even the idea of “representationalism”, the idea of the objective reality of things (Barad, 2007). She takes us on a deep dive into quantum physics and describes how the universe is not a series of objects waiting to be discovered, but that the world is created anew as it comes to meet us halfway. Barad describes how from the perspective of quantum physics, space and time are not the container of the universe, but rather atoms, like the Navaho women weavers, are engaged in a process of “worlding” of manifesting time and space as a result of their situated relationship (Barad, 2007). Barad encourages a move beyond a merely reflective stance to a diffractive view. Diffraction occurs where different coherent patterns of energy, such as waves on the seashore, interact with each other and create new patterns that alter, enhance, and moderate the previous coherence into emergent new information. This can happen with waves on the seashore, with light waves and sound waves but also with stories, narratives and epistemologies. This could be a useful way to think about indigenous knowledge systems and how they create new patterns and stories and ways of thinking within the WEIRD mind. Both the “Decolonial Turn” and the EcoSystemic Return necessitates a deep listening to these complex interference patterns, as different ontologies collide and “intra act”, for what new knowledge might emerge. In quantum physics the separation of the world into subjects and objects is no longer a good enough working model of reality.

While inclusion of diversity is highly positive, Trauma Therapist, Resma Menakem (Menakem, 2020) raises the question, “Diversity from what?” and asks if inclusion of diversity risks becoming merely a process of serial inclusion of previously objectified groups into the implicit ontological framework of WEIRD cultures?

Are we merely inviting a different team to play the same old game where the implicit rules are never questioned? The Decolonial Turn calls those who benefit from coloniality to let go of the objectification of different or “other” racial or identity groups and recognise all peoples are subjects. The EcoSystemic Return requires us to recognise the subjectivity of all nature; animals, plants, fungi, trees, rocks, viruses, carbon dioxide molecules and atoms-its subjects all the way down- nature is somebody (Hoffmeyer, 2008). Once we embrace this way of thinking, the Coronavirus is no longer a mindless replicant or a philosophical zombie out to get us, but we see the pandemic as a complex creatural pattern of cross species communication. The Coronavirus is talking to us (Akomolafe, 2020).

If we take seriously the idea that nature is not only more complex than we think, but more complex than we can think, we might begin to explore the idea that nature and therefore mind has no semantic narrative by which it can be understood (Bateson, 1979). More complex thinking and clever ideas and more talking are not going to help. But perhaps we can understand nature by learning to navigate through the language of creatura, a language we share with nature and the body “that has no things in it only differences and relationships” (Bateson and Bateson, 2004: 191). This strange way of knowing was also described by French philosopher Henry Corbin, which he called “the imaginal world” an epistemology that exists “between our sense perception and categories of the intellect” (Cheetham, 2003: 99). This way of knowing begins to unravel western colonial descriptions of the world because it exposes objectification as a basic Cartesian epistemological error, creatural or imaginal communication can engage only with subjects. Engaging with the creatura involves a different mode of knowing called “heart knowing” or *Gnosis*, a knowing that changes the knowing subject (Cheetham, 2015), the essence of any successful psychotherapy. Corbin also calls the imaginal “active imagination” a process familiar to psychodynamic and psychoanalytic psychotherapists to navigate the processes

of transference and countertransference as a way of gaining knowledge that is intersubjective and arises between people.

Recent developments in our understanding of the Polyvagal theory within psychotherapy is now giving us a much better understanding of the role of the non-verbal body sensing or “neuroception” and its role in the emotional dysregulation of mental health and how we might work with this in a therapeutic context (Dana, 2018; Ogden et al., 2006). A combined diffractive understanding of the language of creatura and how to engage with the polyvagal system has a potential to give us a way to think about how we pick up subtle non-verbal interactions within families and social groups. However, by working with an understanding of both nature and the polyvagal system, through ritual and by working with the body working outside, we can invite creatura out to play as a third agent within the therapeutic process (Berger, 2006).

Recent studies combining psychedelic psychotherapy and neuroscience have brought into question the role of the ego in our mental health and even the subjective reality of the self. It has begun to blur the boundaries between science, nature and spirituality (Razvi and Elfrink, 2020; Carhart-Harris and Friston, 2019). The use of psychedelics in psychotherapy has opened a conversation for a much wider perspective on the nature of the mind and ultimately allowing access to much more complex intra subjective experiences. These experiences include patients in “end-of-life” care experiencing deep *Gnosis*, not only losing a fear of death, but also reporting having meaningful communication with friends and relatives in the afterlife (Strassman, 2001). Carhart-Harris’s theory of the entropic brain gives access to a more complex picture of the human mind than is usually employed in mental health and raises questions about how this might become part of the therapeutic healing for patients suffering from long term depression as well as for palliative care (Carhart-Harris et al, 2014).

As we leave behind the tyranny of our crumbling western narratives, the belief in the objective reality of the world, the illusion of the subjective self and explore the world as only difference and relationships, we are pitched off the edge of the semantic languaged world and begin a free fall through the semiosphere (Crittenden and Landini, 2015; Hoffmeyer, 2008); a time-less, space-less, world of emotional noise with some faintly communicating signs and signals. Navigation in this space requires an almost alchemical process of hermeneutic enquiry informed by “movements of the psyche back and forth across the boundaries of consciousness and over the contours of the emotions” until the shape of what we are looking at becomes clear (Cheetham, 2015, p. 63). We are no longer playing in the socially constructed and Newtonian world with its out-of-date operating system. We need to learn to play a bigger game.

Deep Donkey- asking creatura out to play

I am suggesting playfully that we might need to upgrade our game of Donkey to a quantum systemic indigenous new game to scaffold our way into this complex emerging world, that I call Deep Donkey.

Deep Donkey is a game for one player where we learn to meet the subjects of the universe halfway and invite them out to play. In *Deep Donkey* the physical boundaries have gone, along with the classical Newtonian world view - no wall, no ball, no ground. Instead of the ball we have something non-physical and more emotional such as a dream, a wish, an intent, an action or in the case of systemic psychotherapy - a question. We can think of the solid boundaries of the wall and ground replaced by something like the surface of a pond. Unlike the Newtonian reflective geometry of the wall where the

measured rebound of the ball is determined by the solidity of the wall and the strength of the throw and elasticity of the ball, in *Deep Donkey* nothing is pre-determined. Below the surface of the pond, is water of unknown viscosity, of unknown depth where the bottom is not a reflective surface like the surface of a wall, but a diffractive surface, an unknown landscape shaped by submerged contours, debris and texture. We have to step into and trust a sense of unknowing and be open to curiosity. In *Deep Donkey* we are reminded that creatura is beyond our sense perceptions and there are no concepts or categories of the intellect. The return of our quantum ball comes unexpectedly and emergently without constraints of time, space or any other socially constructed qualities. In a therapy session this might come as a word, a micro gesture or a thought in the mind of the therapist. To catch the response, we need to think not reflectively, waiting for a response to our question, but diffractively, being open to the emergent and contextually responsive to the unknown.

It might be helpful to think of *Donkey* and *Deep Donkey* using the model of the domains (Lang et al., 1990). *Donkey* is played between the realms of production and explanation, a sort of call and response trying to fit an objective reality into different possible narratives. *Deep Donkey* is played across the boundaries of both the domains of production and explanation and into the domain of the aesthetics. A process we can map by using Van Gennep's three stages of a rite of passage, severance, liminality or threshold and incorporation (Van Gennep, 1961). *Deep Donkey* involves a severance from the known, a passage across the threshold into the liminality of creatura and "the imaginal" and then a *return* with a new story, insight or idea, emotion or explanation or determination that requires a process of incorporation into the new reality. In *Deep Donkey*, the practice is of deep listening like the process of *Dadirri* for the aesthetic patterns that connect, and the deep systemic intelligence that predates human thinking which is perhaps the basis of indigenous knowledge systems and learning.

We can also use the model of the domains to help think about how ecopsychotherapy might be formulated in a systemic context. We can think of the domain of production as work with the body, how we engage physically and practically with the world. The realm of explanation can be used to think about the narrative or languaged description of events. Both these domains are subsets of the larger context- the domain of aesthetics and we can widen the lens within an ecopsychological context to think of aesthetics as the realm beyond language, a continuum between nature and body. This includes not only nature but body impulses and responses such as those resulting from experiences of trauma, informed by the theory of the polyvagal and neuroception (Dana, 2018; Ogden et al., 2006; Van Der Kolk, 2014).

EcoSystemic practice in clinical and non-clinical settings

The rules of *Donkey* require an othering by the subject for the game to operate. Most forms of psychotherapy still secretly drink the waters of modernist Darwinian, Newtonian rationalism with its idol of an evidence base, a paternalistic invitation to play *Donkey* and avoid being othered as different. Even systemic psychotherapy with its clear call from Gregory Bateson to find patterns that connect has yet to engage with the unfolding of the disastrous western epistemological error now playing out in the wider natural and cultural eco systems. Systemic family psychotherapy, with its implicit remit of healing the nuclear family, has yet to include an understanding of the body, the legacy of broken tribal language and kinship groups, and nature-based community culture. The value of connection with nature and spiritual ancestors are still some way off and it is difficult to imagine what the beginning of an *EcoSystemic Return* might look like in clinical and non-clinical settings. I will now

describe three examples which I hope might illustrate how a subtle reframing and holding creature in mind can be used within systemic therapy.

Toward an EcoSystemic formulation

As a systemic psychotherapist I am working in CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) with a generic situation that may be familiar. The room is small but has big windows and the garden outside is tended by contractors. The chairs are synthetic fibre for hygiene and I am sitting with a teenage girl and her mother. The girl has been referred as a result of self-harm and suicidal ideation. She is missing school and falling behind in her education. My mental health assessment is focused on her family history, transgenerational trauma, her cutting and how to make it safe enough for her go back to school. As a therapist, thinking about the EcoSystemic Return, I wonder about her relationship with her body and why she is cutting it? I wonder about her wider family and cultural support; the sense of her tribal kinship identity; where is her land and how does she relate to nature in general? What sort of culture has she experienced other than television and social media? Does she have access to any stories which have a narrative of connection, and life purpose? Does she have access to a group of safe elders who have knowledge and skills to lead her through nature-based rites of passage that can help her make sense of all of this and integrate it into her life? Does she have a sense of being part of a deep time lineage of ancestors of whom she is one? Her mother is also traumatised and self-harmed when she was the same age and can barely parent her, and her father is in prison. What support can I offer her with the limited resources I have to hand? In many cases indigenous cultures have a clearer picture of the real depth of human disconnection than we have in western culture and may have some more sophisticated ways to create healthy systemic reconnections.

An unaccompanied asylum seeker from the Sudan

The conversation is slow and relaxed, spacious like the landscape of the Sudan. The session is calmed by the gentle softly spoken Arabic interpreter who is leaning back on his chair. He translates stories of horseback, Janjaweed rebels, killing of cattle and burning villages, lost family. The translator tells the young man's stories about walking in the desert, working in Libya, being robbed frequently at gunpoint, and making it over the channel to the UK, in an unsafe boat after seven attempts. The Sudanese teenager holds these stories in his posture and muscle tone. He has symptoms of PTSD. He is in foster care and learning English at school. He is not broken by these experiences but can make no sense of them and sleeps poorly. His classmates have no understanding of his epic journey. I listen with the interpreter to the young man's stories, quietly, slowly and with deep respect as he begins to recognise and use the ancient healing social context of having his story heard by elders. The sessions move forward in an atmosphere of mutual respect and the nightmares subside. He is still culturally dislocated and part of a new *diaspora of the disconnected* (White, 2021) in his journey from herding his father's cattle with his brothers in the Sudanese bush, to sitting in a secondary school classroom in the UK. Gradually, with the interpreter's help, we are able to make sense of his life changing journey, through connecting with his tribal identity. We learn that he is from a famous and ancient African kingdom, with a lineage of clans and God kings, migrations and battles and assimilation into different pre-colonial Africa landscapes. As I retell his story in the third person, "this is the story of a man who..." he listens, his posture shifts, he nods, he finds his position within the indigenous narratives of his tribe. And he begins to recognise the power of what he has achieved. His body is showing this new knowing.

After a few more sessions, with gentle gratitude and respect, he says he feels better and no longer needs these conversations.

Asking creatura out to play

I was running an experiential ecopsychology retreat for a men's group. It involved some days preparation and culminated in each person staying on their own overnight away from others some woods. The preparation involved repeated exposure to nature without the limitations of a western narrative, a practice of being open to deep listening, not only to ourselves, but what nature might be asking us to think about and remember. One group member who had a number of traumatic experiences from his life in the military as well as family loss. Although he was keen to be part of the group, he had deep belief in the modernist view reality of the world and was not expecting to learn much from nature. After his first "solo" time, he came back and told us of an amazing coincidence he had experienced. He was sitting in the woods staring at a piece of a broken tree trunk and had the thought that it looked just like the head of a woodpecker. Just as this thought entered his mind, a real-life green woodpecker flew in and landed on the stump. In ecopsychology work this sort of synchronistic experience is common, but despite this he was not convinced it had any meaning. The next day he returned with two more strange synchronicities. Driving home he was held up behind a slow-moving van and was struggling to control his road rage, until the van finally turned off and revealed the image of a woodpecker on the side. That evening he visited a close friend who showed him her woodpecker sculpture that she had recently bought. The group was intrigued by his stories, but he was still unconvinced of their significance and for a further solo time headed to a desolate coastal location that he knew, hopefully well away from any creatural or real woodpeckers.

He returned late in the evening to his car after a cold and misty cliff top walk and felt satisfied that he had got what he needed from the experience. While he had been away a young couple with a van had arrived and been camping and partying in the car park. The young man was asleep in his sleeping bag, but his girlfriend was still awake and keen to continue the party. As he returned to his car, she sat up and offered him a drink - a can of Woodpecker Cider.

Imaginal experiences usually take us by surprise and demand our attention. They have a strong emotional charge which is outside of our conscious control and these experiences are meaningful, but the meaning is not always immediately clear, and integration of these experiences can take a long time (Kohner, 2012).

Conclusion

In this article I have used the children's ball game of Donkey as a metaphor to help think about the historically, socially constructed, western cultural world view. I am suggesting that in the face of the emerging systemic complexity of our current ecological and social narrative collapse, we might need to find a more complex metaphor to navigate our future.

I have described how indigenous knowledge systems have a much older and more sophisticated ways of knowing to navigate complex uncertainty and how these ways of knowing are also found within the older thinking systems of the West. Gregory and Mary Catherine Bateson describe the importance of deep listening to our heart knowing or *Gnosis* if we engage with a creatura (Bateson and Bateson,

2004). This is similar to the process known to the Indigenous Australian peoples as *Dadirri*. In this article I have playfully suggested a new metaphor for this process which is sometimes difficult to understand and often seems too deeply entangled in complex epistemological and ontological semantics. The new metaphor I describe for working with creatura I call *Deep Donkey*, an upgraded, neo-indigenous and quantum version of the Donkey game I used to play. I suggest the idea of *Deep Donkey* can be used within both systemic psychotherapy and ecopsychotherapy to navigate our vital EcoSystemic Return.

The incorporation of the EcoSystemic Return within systemic psychotherapy opens the legitimacy of working with body-based trauma which can distort thinking and emotions. (Crittenden, 2008). It also provides a framework for exploring the relationship between nature and mental health in ways that to go beyond a purely narrative approach. An EcoSystemic Return has the potential to realign systemic psychotherapy with indigenous ontologies that have been subjugated, actively suppressed and eradicated and now seem essential to address the global ecological and mental health crisis. The EcoSystemic Return can also provide systemic psychotherapy with the scaffolding to understand not only the emerging complexity of nature, but also the complexity of the human psyche that is emerging within psychedelic psychotherapy.

Despite its apparent deep philosophical and epistemic complexity, the practice of *Deep Donkey* is very familiar to us. It occurs very commonly when we engage with nature with a clear intent, but no fixed goal, and we must wait for an emergent response from a partially known subject – the practice of gardening. Like *Dadirri*, gardening or more accurately organic gardening, has been practised as intergenerational mutual learning for of millennial. *Deep Donkey* is an embodied engagement in a diffractive process, a game of planting seeds in the fertile soil of both mind, and nature, and then waiting patiently to see if and how creatura might come out to play. It is a process most people have forgotten, or have been actively taught to forget, and one which requires remembering as a core practice for the EcoSystemic Return.

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