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**Talking about ‘diverse genders and sexualities’ means talking about more
than white middle-class queers**

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Introduction

In the week leading up to beginning work on writing this chapter, I had the pleasure of spending time at my family's holiday house located in Goolwa, South Australia. Goolwa is located on the lands of the Ngarrendjeri people, the First Nations people whose sovereignty over the lands continues despite the ongoing effects of colonisation. I have been visiting Goolwa since I was a small child, and have a strong sense of affinity for the township and those that neighbour it. On this trip I revisited some of the sites that hold the strongest resonance as signifiers of what Goolwa represents to me. Specifically, the accumulation of almost a life's worth of memories of Goolwa make it for me a place of family, of connectedness to others, of closeness to the sea, and an openness of space that is not so readily apparent in the city of Adelaide where I live. At the same time, however, Goolwa is also for me a place of solitude, separation, and in some ways almost alienation from all the things listed above, albeit alienating in ways that hold the potential to engender personal growth, rather than inhibiting this. Yet at the heart of my affinity for the environs of Goolwa lies a space now prohibited; that of Kumarangk/Hindmarsh Island. An explanation of this prohibition is thus warranted.

The island, located within clear sight across the Murray River from Goolwa, has over the past two decades been a contested site in the ongoing colonisation of Indigenous lands.

Historically (i.e., since the colonisation of the surrounding areas in the mid 1800s), the island was primarily accessible to the general public via a ferry service. In the mid 1990s, however, there began a push for the building of a bridge between Goolwa and Kumarangk/Hindmarsh Island. This push (primarily driven by investors in a marina on the island but also supported by the then Labour government) was met with considerable resistance by the Ngarrendjeri, who stated that connecting the mainland to the island was counter to Ngarrendjeri beliefs about the formation of the land and its meaning for Ngarrendjeri cultural practices.

Specifically, a group of Ngarrendjeri women claimed women-only cultural knowledge that *a priori* precluded the building of the bridge. Yet when the women justifiably refused to present this knowledge publically (on the grounds that it was for women only), and when the Inquiry formed to investigate the matter refused to adopt protocols that would respect the knowledge held by the women, the outcome was that the bridge was built. Of note is the fact that the building of the bridge required amendments to laws that otherwise protect Indigenous cultural practices.

So what does the building of the bridge mean for me as a non-indigenous person? After the building of the bridge, Ngarrindjeri elder Tom Trevor stated publically that ‘We may use the bridge to access our land and waters but culturally and morally we cannot come to terms with this bridge’ (in ABC News, 2010). As someone who is not Ngarrendjeri, however, this statement does not entitle me to access the island via the bridge, a lack of entitlement that I take as both important and legitimate. During my recent visit to Goolwa I walked with my children across the barrage that also links the island to the mainland (a linking that is sanctioned by the Ngarrendjeri). As I crossed the barrage I reflected upon why I had such a strong desire to be able to access the island. For me, the island has a particular quality of separation, of isolation, and a character that is truly unique, partly I think because it presents itself to me in many ways as unknowable, and has done so since I was a child. At the same time it holds many memories of my childhood: trips over on the ferry, visits to the Murray Mouth lookout, and drives around the island. Reflecting on missing the island enabled me to glimpse something of what it must mean to have not just thirty odd years of connection to a place, but tens of thousands of years of connection to a place, as is the case for the Ngarrendjeri people: of family after family living, practicing and visiting there, of ancestors being buried there, and of creation stories being founded there. In attempting to comprehend this ‘glimpse’, I could see both how little I actually was able to comprehend about what the building of the bridge must mean for Ngarrendjeri people, but also how much I need to continue to sit with my lack of comprehension and the glimpse of understanding I gained.

Speaking about this ‘glimpse’ with Dylan Coleman, a Kokatha woman, reminded me further that the non-indigenous/western understanding of place and space as bounded entities is part and parcel of the failure of non-indigenous knowledges to truly comprehend the impact of colonisation. Coleman shared with me the fact that whilst geographically the land of her people is at a considerable distance from the land of the Ngarrendjeri, the Dreaming story that was an aspect of the knowledge held by the Ngarrendjeri women who spoke against the building of the bridge runs across the land from the west coast of Australia over to and through Kumarangk/Hindmarsh Island, on its way passing through Kokatha country. What was at stake in the building of the bridge, then, was not just a ‘little island’ (which itself should have been enough justification), but rather a whole series of interrelated facts about the land across Australia as known by Indigenous people, and which would be negatively impacted by the building of the bridge.

The case of Kumarangk/Hindmarsh Island thus illustrates both the immense and violent force behind the colonial machine, but also the significance of the ongoing resistance of Indigenous people and the fact of Indigenous sovereignty that accompanies this. That Indigenous knowledges could be represented as ‘fabricated’ or even as a ‘hoax’ during the Inquiry into the building of the bridge demonstrates the power accorded to non-indigenous ways of knowing to determine what will count as knowledge and how knowledge claims are assessed. Yet, at the same time, the fact that Ngarrendjeri people continue to speak back to dominant regimes of power, and continue to challenge non-indigenous claims to knowledge, highlights the fact that colonial power is never complete: it forever fails to achieve its aim of writing Australia as a space available for the taking; as a *tabula rasa* open to inscriptions that would seek to refuse the existence of other, incommensurable, ways of understanding the land.

Of course the reader may well ask why I have opened this chapter in this fashion: how does my narrative do anything other than reinscribe a white fantasy of belonging in the space of another? And further, how do I, in my writing, do anything other than play the role of the ‘ethnographic ventriloquist’ (Huggins & Saunders, 1993), speaking both about and for Ngarrendjeri culture? My response to these self-imposed rhetorical questions is what shapes the remainder of this chapter, as I attempt to outline some of the issues - both ontological and epistemological - that shape my narrative above, and how they informed my teaching of a topic on gender and sexuality to a group of social work students in 2010. In teaching the topic I sought to work with the students to develop an understanding of ‘diverse genders and sexualities’ that both resisted the anthropological gaze upon ‘other cultures’, whilst also firmly placing hegemonic western understandings of gender and sexuality in a broader global and historical framework. In order to outline my approach to this teaching, in the following sections I consider the who, what, how, when and why of representation that shaped the topic.

Where we stand

As my narrative above indicates, the matter of where we stand is of vital importance to how those of us identified as non-indigenous people live in a country that continues to prosper from the ‘illegal possession’ of land ([Moreton-Robinson, 2003](#)). Where we stand is important in at least three distinct ways. First, the question of where we stand is important for the issue it raises as to who the presumptive ‘we’ denotes. In the instance of my class on gender and

sexuality, the 'we' was a group of non-indigenous, primarily white, students who had elected into the topic. My reading of the group was that these were a group of relatively liberal students who had a desire to know more about issues of gender and sexuality as they pertain to social work, but that through their liberalism they, at least in part, felt they were already somewhere along the track to engaging in an inclusive approach to gender and sexuality.

Second, and following on from the first point, is the fact that in being a class of non-indigenous students lead by a non-indigenous lecturer, we were all standing on land in which we had some form of stake, but to which we had an ethically suspect claim to belong. This was an important starting place, as it would have been far too easy for us all to perpetuate the assumption that the 'we' was constituted by a group of 'well meaning' people who, in talking critically about gender and sexuality, were somehow outside the operations of colonisation that afford us the government-granted right to stand on the land and speak. That we acknowledged that we stood on Kaurna land, and that we spoke about this standing and what it meant for us to do so, was thus an important aspect of both the opening session of the topic, but also in the weeks that followed as we sought to unpack the differential impact of the built environs upon varying groups of people.

And third, the question of place has specific implications not only in terms of whose land we were standing on (and on whose land I work in Adelaide, and upon whose land I stay when I visit Goolwa), but from whose land the built environs are *made*. Coleman (2010) speaks of the modernity of buildings in the city of Adelaide – modern in the greater scheme of Indigenous ownership of the land – and the materials from which they are made. She speaks of the fact that not only do such buildings sit on stolen land, but also that they are made of materials that too are stolen. To sit inside the buildings at my university and to teach within them is thus to think about what it means to have the luxury of often unwittingly being surrounded by another person's property that has both been appropriated, but which nonetheless carries with it the sovereignty of the people from which it is taken. As I looked out the windows in the teaching room, and as I now look out the windows of my family's holiday house, I see not simply the environs and the land that is not rightfully mine, but I also see the windows through which I look, the sands from which they are made, and the stories that those sands hold. Importantly, to 'see' country in this way is not about evoking an idealised 'pre-colonial' landscape, in which myself as the colonial subject invents a fantasy of a world without colonisation (Chow, 1994; Riggs, 2004). Rather, my point here, drawing on

Coleman's work, is that the colonial past is very much the colonial present, locked up as it is in both the material and psychical relations that shape the spaces we all move in.

Who is standing

Of course where we stand is almost inseparable from who is doing the standing, as denoted above in my discussion of the 'we' who were standing in my gender and sexuality topic. In the narrative that I opened this chapter with, I am clearly located not simply as a non-indigenous person, but as a non-indigenous person who enjoys the privilege of a 'holiday house'; someone who is university educated, someone who has paid employment, and someone who can 'holiday' away from such employment and reflect upon their life. In other words, I speak from a very privileged position. But how does one speak from such a position, and do so with the aim of critically deconstructing that position, without engaging in what Sara Ahmed (2004a) refers to as the 'non-performativity of anti-racism'? In her work Ahmed speaks of the problem that arises when white people who 'admit' their whiteness treat this admission as inherently critical. Instead, she suggests that there must be a 'double turn'; that in turning towards our own whiteness, those of us who identify as white must simultaneously turn away from ourselves and towards those who have long seen, spoken of, and critiqued whiteness.

In regards to the question of who is standing, and in reference to my gender and sexuality class, the task we engaged in was to find ways of looking at who we stand as *through our relationships to other people*. This involved, as Sanjay Sharma (2006) notes, a focus both on the 'concrete other' (i.e., the actual people upon whose disadvantage our privilege rests), and the 'ontological other' (i.e., the other as a category against and through which our sense of self is formed). To stand as a non-indigenous Australian, and moreover to teach as a non-indigenous Australian to non-indigenous students, is to acknowledge that who we stand as is always a consequence: it is always a product or outcome of an ongoing series of historical relations between actual colonisers and actual Indigenous nations and peoples, as well as the ongoing social hierarchies in which these categories are made to matter. As such, and as Ahmed (2006) again notes, it is racism that produces race, not vice versa. In the context of a colonial nation such as Australia, it is colonialism itself – and its accompanying practices of empire that were informed by a possessive investment in land and a logic of patriarchal white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2004) that treats others (in this case Indigenous people) as

objects to be dispossessed – that produces the hierarchical power relations in which I am made to matter as a non-indigenous person (Fanon, 1967).

Perhaps part of what I am suggesting, then, is that indigeneity, or one's status as an Indigenous person (or not), functions as a superordinate category in Australia. In stating this, my claim is not *per se* to argue for a ranking of identity categories; indeed, much of my focus in teaching the gender and sexuality topic was on intersectionality theory ([Crenshaw, 1991](#)) as a means for understanding the complexities of identity. Rather, my point is that, in a nation founded on colonisation, and in a nation that continues in many ways to deny the ongoing effects of genocide and dispossession, whether or not one identifies as Indigenous has a particular set of consequences for identity formation, even if this isn't readily apparent to, or indeed is wilfully denied by, many non-indigenous people. Thinking about who is standing thus requires us to think about the ontological claims that accompany this. I will return to this point later in the chapter, but it is important to note here that within the topic on gender and sexuality I drew upon Beryl Curt's (1994) notion of the individual as a 'fold' of the social to highlight how the latter always already produces subjectivities according to existing social cultural hierarchies, and through which such subjectivities are rendered intelligible. Thus, as Alison Ravenscroft (2003) suggests in her analysis of the work of Kathleen Mary Fallon (a white lesbian woman who has written publically about being a foster carer of an Indigenous child); 'she is the colonising subject and she acts against this and she is the colonising subject and...' (241). Here Ravenscroft clearly marks the both/and nature of colonising subjectivities: that in being formed through a relationship to ongoing histories of colonisation, non-indigenous people – even those who engage in an anti-racist praxis – are inextricably bound up in the effects and affects of colonisation. Who speaks, then, is always an effect of power, one that brings with it a particular injunction to consider the representational components of colonisation, as I discuss in the following section.

Before going on to discuss how we represent the places upon which we stand, however, it is important to note a further point about who is standing. As I stated earlier, my class was comprised of non-indigenous students. This demands the question of why this is the case – why is the student body in all of the topics I teach almost entirely comprised of non-indigenous students, especially given the fact that government reports continue to indicate that, since the early 2000's, the numbers of Indigenous students enrolled in university courses are increasing (e.g., Schwab, 2006). The answer to this question lies in the fact that such

reports indicate that whilst the numbers of Indigenous students enrolling in higher education are increasing, the nature of such enrolments is limited in at least three ways: 1) Indigenous students typically enrol in ‘new universities’ (which are seen as less prestigious than older universities; have high numbers of students taught by low numbers of staff; and are often funded at lower levels than older universities), 2) Indigenous students may often fail to complete degrees or may undertake non-award degrees, and that 3) for those students who undertake award degrees, these are typically in the humanities or arts. Thus whilst the numbers of Indigenous students enrolled is increasing, this does not necessarily translate into a significantly greater number of Indigenous people with higher degrees, or degrees that straightforwardly translate into higher numbers of Indigenous people who are able to gain employment as a result of their degree. As Schwab notes, some of these outcomes may be intentional choices made by Indigenous students that are informed by their cultural and worldviews. However for many Indigenous students, their higher education ‘choices’ are still curtailed by the impact of racism, finance, family responsibilities, and the effects of intergenerational trauma arising from genocide and dispossession. The who that I see in my classrooms, then, is not simply about who I see (i.e., primarily white middle-class students who will go onto reasonably well paid professional careers), but also who I *don't* see (i.e., Indigenous students for whom educational outcomes may be considerably disparate to those of non-indigenous students). This point about who actually enrolls in my gender and sexuality topic has considerable implications for how I represent non-western standpoints within the topic, as I discuss in the following section.

How we represent standing

Who is standing and on whose land were thus central questions within the gender and sexuality topic, ones that required ongoing examination and ones that framed how the subsequent pedagogic material was presented. From my perspective, taking a traditional approach of ‘once there was this and now there is that’ would only have served to retain a focus on the ‘what’ of colonisation, but not the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of colonisation. Focusing instead on the latter allowed us to discuss colonisation as a structuring logic that shapes our very capacity to see what is before us. Much like my reflections upon my desire to visit Kumarangk/Hindmarsh Island again, looking at who we speak as and how we speak (i.e., what authority sanctions us to do so) was an important component of actively seeking to

explore how, in the very act of speaking of ourselves, it was potentially possible to catch a glimpse of all that lay outside our frame of reference.

Yet in terms of affect, ‘catching a glimpse’ doesn’t necessarily produce anything beyond a sense either of guilt, or possibly helplessness, for non-indigenous students. What we had to do, in relation to both our discussions of colonisation and heteronormativity, was to consider what we could do ethically with these glimpses. In this regard, there are many models evoked by non-indigenous people that are claimed to foster a sense of belonging to land, yet all of which I would suggest involve acts of appropriation or colonisation. For example, and as Sonja Kurtzer (2003) notes in relation to her analysis of non-indigenous Australian Kim Mahood’s claims to ‘becoming indigenous’ (claims made also by Germaine Greer), such claims only serve as yet another form of theft of Indigenous knowledges. What we as a class had to do instead was to take up Ahmed’s (2004a) challenge to make a double turn: to examine how western, non-indigenous knowledges are formed through a relationship to both concrete and ontological others. Importantly, however, in developing such an approach we had to carefully tread the line between speaking *of* the other’s knowledge, and speaking *for* the other’s knowledge (particularly given, as noted above, that the class was almost entirely comprised of white middle-class students). And this was one of the launching points for the class: how do incommensurable differences between differing knowledges potentially prevent us from truly understanding the position of another, yet at the same time how does the location of such incommensurabilities within a broader social context shaped by hierarchies require at least an attempt to engage in an encounter with the other.

How we engage in a representation of the other, then, becomes just as important as where we stand and who we stand as. Indeed, these issues are thoroughly intertwined, as my weaving back and forth between them in this chapter would indicate. This was brought to my attention again recently in a viewing of Jeni Thornley’s (2008) documentary *Island Home Country*. In the documentary Jeni, a non-indigenous woman, speaks of ‘not knowing’ about the brutal colonisation of Tasmania, where she grew up. In response, she returns to Tasmania to learn about its history, and in so doing speaks to local Indigenous women. These women challenge Jeni in regards to how she represents Indigenous people, and in particular how she represents Truganini, an Indigenous woman who it was long claimed was the ‘last of the Tasmanian Aborigines’. Representing ancestors, the Indigenous women suggested, even if to think critically about colonial histories, is still an act of appropriation, and one that is unlikely to be

sanctioned by the families of the people represented. This gave me pause to reflect upon my own use of the six-part documentary series *First Australians* in my teaching of the gender and sexuality topic, and in particular my use of the episode that portrayed the life of Truganini. My intent in using the episode had been to demonstrate that gender is always already racialised: that as Truganini and her people were being forced off their lands or forced to work for (and thus in many ways become complicit with) the colonial regime, white women in Australia were enjoying a wide range of privileges that came at the expense of Indigenous people. Again, then, reflecting on my use of the documentary reminded me of how fraught it is to rely upon representations of concrete others to engage in the work of reflexively challenging privilege.

The question this leads me to ask, then, and again following Ahmed (2004b), is how do we work with students to facilitate the attachment of meanings in ways that encourage new associations between concepts, but which don't do so through appropriation? And perhaps put more strongly, how do we create spaces that block particular (stereotyped) ways of knowing about the other, but which open up other ways of thinking? Within the topic on gender and sexuality I attempted to do this by employing a critical constructionist approach that, perhaps counterintuitively, treated constructionist claims as fact: not through a form of critical realism or via recourse to cultural relativism *per se*, but rather through an approach that was grounded in the very fact of difference. In other words, as opposed to promoting the view that 'all cultures are different' (which typically still leaves dominant group cultures as the norm), or stating that race or gender or sexuality (for example) are social constructions, I attempted to convey to students an understanding of both the 'fact' of incommensurable cultural differences, but also to emphasise that 'seeing' cultural difference as we do in the west is the product of a very particular regime of looking, one that is proprietorial, judicial, and most often colonising: to apprehend the other, in this fashion, is to *have* the other (Torgovnick, 1990).

One of the ways in which I developed this approach, and as I have written about elsewhere (Riggs, 2009), was to centre Indigenous sovereignty as a fact, albeit one for which non-Indigenous people cannot speak. In so doing, we discussed as a class the 'obvious' facts (i.e., that there were over 200 Indigenous nations prior to colonisation, that each of these have their own sovereign claims to land, their own creation narratives, their own beliefs about gender and sexuality), but we also discussed the fact that our 'knowing' of these facts will always

already be limited by our position as non-indigenous people. In a sense, then, this approach adopts what Fiona Nicoll (2004) advocates as one of ‘falling out of perspective’: instead of attempting to assert a position of knowing (or conversely, to deny any knowledge), non-indigenous people can instead state that there is something we cannot know, even if at the same time we can know something of it. What we can know is that Indigenous people have a sovereign right to their land, and further, that Indigenous people hold what Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003) refers to as an ‘ontological relationship to land’ (which I take to mean that Indigenous people embody a relationship to their land through which they carry their sovereign title to the land, even if they may not be on it). What we can know of this is that this sovereignty has never been ceded, and that non-indigenous claims to land must always be understood as existing in a relationship to the ongoing fact of sovereignty. A critical constructionist approach here is applicable precisely for its capacity to accept that ownership and rights are themselves social categories, in which (at least in the west) particular ways of being are privileged or made to matter, but that this does not mean that there are not other ways of understanding the world that are both incommensurable but also inalienable. Thinking about how non-indigenous people (including myself and my students) can understand our location in Australia and our gendered and sexualised identities thus required us to take this critical constructionist framework and use it to examine which models of the self are typically privileged when we talk about gender and sexuality.

Which model of the self

Sharma’s (2006) work is useful in attempting to grapple with issues of difference and identity. He proposes the figure of the rhizome as way of understanding relationships, by placing ‘both the inside/outside in the same field of immanence. The outside (difference) is *not* a function of the inside (identity); rather, it is *difference* which makes the inside possible and is conceived instead as a ‘multiplicity’ (or a singularity) that is irreducible’ (p. 212). Such an approach, Sharma suggests, allows for a definition of the self that does not rely upon a negation of the other. In other words, rather than simply perpetuating the master/slave logic, it is possible to acknowledge both how this logic structures western thought, but how it is nonetheless an imposition upon a set of differences that need not always be distinguished in such ways. Greg [Thomas \(2007\)](#) makes this point well in his Pan-African account of African subjectivities, where he suggests that ‘There are never, ever merely girls and boys, men and women, without race and class. Analytically speaking, there are instead a legion of genders

and sexualities, so to speak; and they cannot be reduced to the anatomy of any one white elite' (p. 68). Similarly, and as Carolyn Epple (1998) notes in her work on the Navajo nádleehí, within a Navajo world view the meanings attached to clothing or jewellery do not automatically map across onto a reading of gendered differences. As Epple suggests, terms such as 'berdache' or 'two-spirit' fail to capture a Navaho worldview in regards to differences between bodies, and instead reduce nádleehí bodies to being 'just like' transgender people in the west.

Indigenous sistergirls in Australia too have written and spoken about the ways in which western concepts of gender do not match up with Indigenous understandings of identity. Kooncha Brown, for example, in her documentary and writing (2004; 2006), speaks of the ways in which sistergirls were viewed within Indigenous cultures prior to colonisation, where in some cultures sistergirls were included and valued whilst in others this was not the case. Importantly, whilst Brown does not paint an idealised image of the inclusion of sistergirls within Indigenous cultures, she nonetheless emphasises the negative effects of colonisation upon sistergirls, including the enforcement of stereotyped traditional gender roles upon Indigenous communities by colonisers, the forcing of gendered violence upon sistergirls (such as rape or sex work), and the higher risk that this now places sistergirls for contracting STDs. Again, then, the voices of sistergirls reminded us in the gender and sexuality class both that there are experiences of gender and sexuality that exist outside the west, and that these cannot be easily (or usefully) represented within the standard categories available within the west. That those of us who live in the west inhabit a range of identity categories that historically were developed in opposition to (or indeed drew upon) those encountered as part of colonisation is undoubtable. But the assumption that it is the other that differs from the normative western self (treated as the centre) is thrown into question when we consider cultural practices that precede and exceed western colonial inscription.

When it comes to talking about the white western self, and particularly in regards to gender and sexuality (as I have done elsewhere, see Riggs, 2010), Sharma's (2006) use of the rhizome is again productive. Through the figure of the rhizome we can very much see how the white heterosexual middle-class Australian self is constructed as the normative centre, but we can also see how that occurs as a result of the location of this identity at the intersection of a range of categories that simultaneously, rather than cumulatively, produce a site of privilege that always sits alongside the figure of the ontological other. Yet at the same time, the status

of this identity position as also non-indigenous draws our attention to a founding problem in terms of its absolute authority. Indeed, this founding problem for white identities in Australia is perhaps usefully represented by the German term for multiple/intersecting identities – ‘Mehrfachzugehörigkeiten’ – which as Gabi Rosenstreich (2007) suggests refers to a sense of multiple belongings, rather than identities (p. 136 f5). The fact that any configuration of the non-indigenous self has both many sets of claims to belonging, yet at the same time lacks any constitutive claim to belonging, is perhaps the hallmark of non-indigenous identities in Australia (Nicolacopoulos, & Vassilacopoulos, 2004). Certainly in my own life and in particular in my experiences at Goolwa, whilst at times (when I have lived and worked in Goolwa and its environs as an out gay man) I have experienced an odd mixture of inclusion and exclusion from other non-indigenous people, I have at the same time always had a sense of uncanny connection to Goolwa as a place: uncanny for the fact that whilst I have so many memories of being there, I also know that it is not ‘my place’: that more so than in the city of Adelaide I feel a distinct sense of being on someone else’s land. Thus whilst I have worn many different hats at different times during my life visiting Goolwa, I have never worn one that made me feel totally at home. This, I think, is a good thing, and is actually what appeals to me about Goolwa, as it both reminds me of what I am grasping for, and gives me a starting place from which to comprehend the unattainability of what lies beyond my reach.

Again, then, the figure of the rhizome reminds us that the white western self is as much a product of western discourses of race, difference, and sameness as is any other. Importantly, however, this is not to slip into a discourse of ‘white people are different too’, as Ahmed (2006) warns against. Rather, it is to recognise that the constitutive structures of white western notions of self bind white people to a vision of gender and sexuality that can’t simply be undone by recourse to an ‘exotic other’ in order to forever and always prop up a normative white self. And it is in the recognition of this that lies the possibility of locating western notions of gender and sexuality within a broader cross-cultural framework that doesn’t simply treat ‘whiteness’ as but one of many cultures, nor does it claim to be able to adequately speak for the concrete other. Instead, my point here is that the ‘rules’, if you like, of western discourses of gender and sexuality, are relatively readily explicable. That this can then be used to examine how such discourses are constituted through and against competing discourses, thus allowing for the fact of difference to stand whilst not reducing it to a western model or interpretation.

Why all this matters

Whilst writing this chapter I have repeatedly felt the need to pre-empt the question of how these wider discussions relate to the teaching of a course on gender and sexuality. For me, the most simple answer is that my university requires the ‘inclusion’ of Indigenous content across all courses, yet to date this has been patchy and typically undertaken in a way that yet again places Indigenous issues on the periphery. Of course, and as Ahmed (2006) notes, this raises the problem of tick boxes: that on the one hand any given institution may demand a set of minimum requirements for inclusion of Indigenous content, but on the other may utilise a wider, vaguer, more aspirational notion of inclusion that still fails to move beyond whiteness as the norm. Indeed, as Sara suggests: we could ‘even describe the ‘tick box’ as a spectre behind this law: the tick box is what we want to avoid in interpreting legislation, *and yet it is also what the legislation requires or even puts in place*. Moving beyond compliance becomes a matter of compliance’ (19).

My approach to teaching social work students has always been to try and move beyond a tick box approach, whilst also providing students with practical skills for when they enter the workforce. A seemingly impossible task! Why all that I have covered in this chapter matters, then, is because it represents one attempt at moving beyond tick boxes that nonetheless provides critical thinking skills that allow students to recognise that the concrete other *does* possess knowledge, that such knowledge is not a product for consumption nor an object that can be easily incorporated, but that it will nonetheless structure their engagement with those different to themselves. Underpinning my attempts at undertaking this teaching has been a desire to instil in students an injunction to avoid rendering the challenges facing dominant groups in working with those in marginalised positions out to be the work of those who are marginalised. Understanding the position of the other, or at the very least comprehending that such a position exists and is valid, requires a move beyond a benevolent or paternalistic social work, and towards one in which concepts of ‘self-determination’ or ‘cultural-competency’ have some actual meaning outside of neo-liberal parlance. To expect that those who are marginalised will ‘explain themselves’ represents the most insidious rhetoric of self-determination, just as a tick box approach to ‘learning about other cultures’ is a counterproductive means to developing competence for working cross-culturally. My response in the gender and sexuality topic was to create a space where new meanings could be developed and attached to the terms ‘gender and sexuality’. In so doing, my intent was that

students would not only see the diverse enactments of gender and sexuality *within* western cultures, but that they could also place western expressions of gender and sexuality within a broader global framework that decentered the west without claiming to speak for the other.

Why this all matters is thus a very fair question to keep asking. For me, there lies a propensity within social work to believe that ‘doing good’ stems from ‘meaning well’. As colonial, paternalistic, benevolent discourses about Indigenous people demonstrate, however, this is rarely the case. That the students I work with might possibly see themselves as both agents of change and potential weapons of oppression is thus, in my opinion, vital. And that they may challenge those they then work with to reconsider their own roles as agents of change and potential oppressors is equally important. That the contingency of western knowledge about gender and sexuality can be highlighted only to be decentered (but not replaced with a new, appropriated, centre) is thus perhaps the why that drives my teaching.

Concluding thoughts

To return to my opening narrative, it is useful to think again about how what was in effect a loss that I was voicing (albeit one that I accept as a fair piece of collateral damage on my behalf as a non-indigenous person), can produce some sort of ethical response. How, in other words, do we recognise the loss experienced by another, without taking it as our own, or refusing it as not our problem? And how do we at the same time create a space in which we can ethically speak of our own losses? Indigenous scholars and activists across Australia have repeatedly said that the process of reconciliation need not be one of guilt-mongering, nor need it be an act of contrition. Yet time and time again those on the left seem to act as though this is what is called for, and those on the right seem to rally against this alleged call. Instead, perhaps what is called for is a simultaneous recognition of what was lost, what remains, and what can even possibly be gained. In regards to the former, what was lost was the possibility of creating a nation founded upon a treaty that recognised and was principled by the sovereignty of Indigenous nations. What was lost (or more precisely, violently stolen) for Indigenous nations was lives, the effects of which continue. And what was lost for non-indigenous people was the possibility of having a sense of belonging that isn’t founded upon colonising violence. What remains, is the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, the fact of Indigenous ownership of land, the fact of racialised colonial hierarchies and their ongoing role in structuring the Australian nation, and the ongoing search for some way to call

Australia home. As to what can be gained, this is perhaps the hardest to answer. For my journey around Goolwa, what I gained was the possibility of envisioning a life in which a nice neat tick box isn't the desirable outcome. Owning one's self, being one's self to the exclusion of others; that is but one way of being. Gaining a sense of self that takes into account one's own loss, and that is indeed accountable for the loss of others, might be something worth having, even if it requires a radical decentring of the non-indigenous self and the ways of being that inform it.

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