2013

Anxious settler belonging: actualising the potential for making resilient postcolonial subjects

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Publication Details

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Abstract
When I arrived in Aurukun, west Cape York, it was the heat that struck me first, knocking city pace from my body, replacing it with a languor familiar to my childhood, although hea more northern. Fieldwork brings with it its own delights and anxieties. It is where I feel competent and incompetent, where I am most indebted and thankful for the generosity kindness of strangers. I love the way “no-where” places quickly become somewhere and some to me. Then there are the bodily visitations: a much younger self haunts my body. At time adult self abandons me, leaving me nothing but an awkward adolescent: clumsy, sweaty, too m body, too white, too urban, too disconnected or unable to interpret the social rules. My body in that this is not my home, but home for Wik and Wik Way people. Flailing about unmoored from socio-cultural system that I take for granted, and take comfort from – and I draw sustena Anxiety circles, closes in on me, who grows distant and unsure, fragmented. Misusing Deborah Rose, I’m tempted to say I’m separated from my nourishing terrain. Indeed it can feel like nation (not the country) slipped out from under my feet.

Keywords
potential, anxious, resilient, actualising, postcolonial, belonging, subjects, settler, making

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

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When I arrived in Aurukun, west Cape York, it was the heat that struck me first, knocking city pace from my body, replacing it with a languor familiar to my childhood, although heavier, more northern. Fieldwork brings with it its own delights and anxieties. It is where I feel competent and incompetent, where I am most indebted and thankful for the generosity of strangers. I love the way “no-where” places quickly become somewhere and some to me. Then there are the bodily visitations: a much younger self haunts my body. At time adult self abandons me, leaving me nothing but an awkward adolescent: clumsy, sweaty, too dry, too white, too urban, too disconnected or unable to interpret the social rules. My body insists that this is not my home, but home for Wik and Wik Way people. Flailing about unmoored from socio-cultural system that I take for granted, and take comfort from – and I draw sustenance from – Anxiety circles, closes in on me, who grows distant and unsure, fragmented. Misusing Deborah Rose, I’m tempted to say I’m separated from my nourishing terrain. Indeed it can feel like nation (not the country) slipped out from under my feet.

I want to consider the above as an affective event, which seemingly reveals a lack of fortitude very opposite of resilience. A settler Australian – myself – comfort and sense of belonging disturbed in the face of Aboriginal – in this case Wik – jurisdiction and primacy. But could generative of a kind of resilience, an ethical, postcolonial resilience, which is necessary for fitting up to and intervening in the continence of colonial power relations in Australia? Affects are telling: deeply embodied cultural knowledge, which is largely invisible, is made present. Political and ethical potential of anxiety is that it registers a confrontation: a test. If resilience is capacity to be flexible and to successfully overcome challenges, then can settler anxiety be thought of as signalling an opportunity for ethical engagements (Latukefu et. al., “Enabling”)? But it necessitates resilience thinking to account for socio-cultural power relations.

Over the years, I have experienced many anxieties when undertaking research in Indigenous Australia (many of them warranted no doubt – What am I doing? Why? Why should people be interested? What’s in it for whom?) and have sensed, heard and read about many other experiences of unsettlement. Encounters between Aboriginal and settler Australians are often highly emotional: indeed can the “good whitefellas” very anxious. My opening example could be explained away as an all too familiar experience of a new research environment in an unfamiliar place and, more so, cultural dissonance. But I am not convinced by such an argument. I think that unsettlement is a more general response to encountering the materiality of Indigenous people and life: the density of people’s presence rather than representations. My interest is in what I am calling (in a crude sociological category) the “good white women”, in particular anxious progressive settlers, who wish to ethically engage with Indigenous Australians. If, as I’m arguing, that encounters with Indigenous people, representations, cause the “good settler” to experience such deep uncertainty that transformation is resisted, if not even refused, then how are “we” to surmount such a challenge?

I want to explore anxiety as both revealing the embodiment of colonialism but also its potent disturb and rupture, which in turn might provide an opportunity for the creation of anti-col
relationality. Decolonisation is a cultural process, which requires a lot more than good intent. Collective and personal tenacity is needed. To do so requires activating resilience: renewed postcolonial ethics. Scholarship emphasises that resilience is more than an individual quality, and importantly can be enhanced or taught through experiential interventions (Lafukefu, “Fire”; Howard & Johnson). Why do white settlers become anxious confronted with Indigenous politics and the demand to be recognised as peers, not a vulnerable people? Postcolonial and whiteness scholars’ have accused settlers of de-materialising Indigeneity and blocking the political by staying in an emotional register and thus resisting the pol encounter (Gelder & Jacobs; Gooder & Jacobs; Moreton-Robinson; Povinelli). Largely I agree many times I’ve heard whitefellas complain, “We’re here for culture not politics”. However, in above analysis emotions are not the material of proper critique, yet anxiety is named a articulation of the desire for the restoration of colonial order. Arguably anxiety is a jolt of comfort and complacency. Anxiety is doing a lot of cultural work. Settler anxiety is thus a retreat from the political but an everyday modality in which cultural politics is enacted. The potential experiential, experimental site in which progressive settlers can harness their ethical will to face up to substantial collective challenges.

Strangely Indigeneity is everywhere. And nowhere. There is the relentless bad news report in the media, interspersed with occasional good news; Aboriginal television dramas; the burgeoning film industry; celebrated artists; musicians; sports people; and no shortage of corporate government walls adorned with Indigenous art; and the now commonplace Welcome to Country. However, as Ken Gelder writes:

> in the contemporary postcolonial moment, Aboriginal people have more presence in the nation even as so many settler Australians (unlike their colonial counterparts) have less contact with them. Postcolonialism in Australia means precisely this, amongst other things: more presence, but – for non-Aboriginal Australians – less Aboriginal contact. (172).

What happens when increased “presence” becomes contact? His concern, as is mine, is political encounters have been replaced by the personal and social: “with contact functioning in something traumatic or estranging any more, but as the thing that enables a settler Australian completion to happen” (Gelder 172). My interest is in returning to the estranging and traumatic Mainstream perceptions of “Aborigines” and Aboriginality, Chris Healy argues, have little to no to do with experiences of historical or contemporary Indigenous peoples, but rather refer particular cultural assemblage and intercultural space that is the product of stories inherited colonists and colonialism (4-5). The dominance of the assemblage “Aborigine” enables forgetting of contemporary Indigenous people: everyday encounters, with people or representations, and Australia’s troubling history (Healy). There is an engagement with the far or phantom Indigeneity but an inability to deal with the material embodied world – of Indige people. Sociality is denied or repressed. The challenge and thus potential change are resisted.

ii) My initial pursuit of anxiety probably came from my own disturbances, and then observing feeling it circulate in what sometimes seemed the most unlikely places. Imagine: forty “progressive” white Australians have travelled to a remote part of Australia for a cultural tour experience on country, camping, learning and sharing experiences with Traditional Owners. After days in, we gather to hear an Elder discuss the impact and pain of, what was formally know as the Northern Territory Intervention. He speaks openly and passionately, and yes, politically.
given the opportunity to hear from people who are directly affected by the policy, rather relying on distant, southern, second hand, recycled ideologies and opinions. Yet all immediately I felt a retreat, shrinking, rejection – whitefellas abandoning their alliances. An circulates, infects bodies: its visceral. None of the tourists spoke about what happened, how felt, in fear of naming, what? Anxiety after all does not have an object, it is not produced from immediate threat but rather it is much more existential or a struggle against meaningless (Harari). In anxiety one has nowhere else to turn but into one’s self. It feels bad. The “good women” evaporates – an impossible position to hold. But is it all bad? Here is a challenge: advance conditions. Thus it is an opportunity to practice resilience.

To know how and why anxiety circulates in intercultural encounters enables a deeper understanding of the continuance of colonial order: the deep pedagogy of racial politics that shapes perception, sense making and orders values and senses of belonging. A critical entanglement postcolonial anxiety exposes the embodiment of colonialism and, surprisingly, models for colonial social relations. White pain, raw emotions and an inability to remain self possessed in face of Indigenous conatus is telling; it is a productive space for understanding why Australia fails, despite the good intentions, to live well in a colonised country. Held within postcolonial anxiety are other possibilities. This is not to be an apologist for white people behaving badly or remaining relaxed and comfortable, or disappearing into white guilt, as if this is an absolute or offers absolution. But rather if there is so much anxiety than what has it to tell us importantly, I think it gives us something to work with, to be otherwise. Does anxiety hold potential to be redirected to more productive, ethical exchanges and modes of belonging? I there is a need to rethink anxiety, understand its heritage and to work with the disturbance registers.

iii) No doubt putting anxiety alongside resilience could seem a little strange. However, as discuss, I understand anxiety as productive, both in the sense that it reveals a continuing colonial order and is an articulation of the potential for transformation. In this sense, much like resilience thinking in ecological and social sciences, I am suggesting what is needed is to embrace “chance and disturbance rather than denying or constraining it” (Walker & Salt 147). I will argue anxiety is the registering of hazard. Albeit in extremely different circumstances than resilience thinking is commonly evoked, which is most often responses to natural disasters (W 1219). Settler Australians are not under threat or a vulnerable population. I am in no suggesting they or “we” are, but rather I want to investigate the existential “threat“ in intercultural encounters, which registers as postcolonial anxiety, a form of disturbance that in turn provides an opportunity for positive change and an undoing of colonial relations (Wilson 1221).

Understanding community resilience, according to Wilson, as the conceptual space at intersection between economic, social and environmental capital is helpful for trying to conceptualise the knotty, power laden and intransigent of settler and Indigenous relations (11). Wilson emphases that social resilience is about the necessity of people, or in his terms, how systems, learning to manage by change and importantly, pre-emptive change. In particular critical of resilience theorists “lack of attention to relations of power, politics and culture” (122). Resilience, according to Ungar, is the protective processes that individuals, families communities use to cope, adapt and take advantage of their “assets” when facing significant stress and these protective processes are often unique to particular contexts, I am wondering if anxiety might be a strange protective factor that prevents, or indeed represses, settlers engaging more positively with intercultural disturbance (“Researching” 387). Surely in unseating intercultural encounters a better use of settler assets, such as racial power and privilege,
mobilise assets to embrace change and experiment with the possibility of transforming transferring racial power with the intent of creating a genuine postcolonial country. After population’s resilience is reliant on interdependence (Ungar, “Community” 1742).

iv) What can anxiety tell about the motivations, desires for white belonging and intercultural relations? We need to pay attention to affects, or rather affects motivate attention and an experiences, and thus are very telling (Evers 54). The life of our bodies largely remains invisible the study of affect and emotions enables the tracing of elements of the socio-cultural that present and absent (Anderson & Harrison 16). And it is presence and absence that is my interest. Lacan, following Freud, famously wrote that anxiety does not have an object. He is arguing anxiety is not caused by the loss of an object “but is fundamentally the affect that signals whether Other is too close, and the order of symbolization (substitution and displacement) is at risk disappearing” (Harari xxxii). The “good white woman” feels the affects of encountering alterity how does she respond? To know to activate (or develop the capacity for) resilience requires understanding anxiety as a site for transformation, not just pain.

Long before the current intensification of affect studies, theorists such as Freud, Kierkegaard, Rollo May argued that anxiety should be depathologied. Anxiety indicates vitality: a struggle against non-being. Not simply a threat of death but more so, meaninglessness (May 15). An existentialist philosophers. Anxiety, as Kierkegaard held, “is always to be understood as orientated to freedom” (qt May 37). Or as he famously wrote, “the dizziness of freedom” (Kierkegaard 138) possibilities of life, and more so the human capacity for self-awareness of life’s potential imagine, dream, visualise a different, however unknown, future, self – and the potential, albeit not ensured, to creatively actualise these possibilities brings with it anxiety. “Anxiety is the structure of feeling that is inherent in the act of transition”, as Homi Bhabha writes, but also the affect of freedom (qt Farmer 358-9). Growth, expansion, transformation co-exist with anxiety (May). In a Spinozian sense, anxiety is thinking with our bodies.

In a slightly different vein, Bhabha argues for what he terms “creative anxiety”. Albeit inadvertent anxiety embraces a state of “unsettled negotiation” by refusing imperious demands of totality discourses, and in this sense is an important political tactic of “hybridization” (126). Drawing Deleuze, he calls this process becoming minor: relinquishing of power and privilege. Encountering difference, the proximity to difference, whereby it is not possible to draw a clear unambiguous line between one’s self and one’s identification with another produces anxiety. Becoming minor emerges through the affective processes of anxiety (Bhabha 126). Where the anxiety there is hope. Bhabha refers to this as anxious freedom. The subject is painfully aware her indeterminacy. Yet this is where possibility lies, or as Bhabha writes, there is no ace minority politics without a painful “bending” toward freedom (130). In the antagonism is potential to be otherwise, or create an anti-colonial future. Out of the disturbance might emerge resilient postcolonial subjects.

v) The intercultural does not just amplify divisions and difference. In an intercultural setting bodies are mingling and reacting to affective dimensions. It is the radical openness of the body generates potential for change but also unsettles, producing the anxious white body. Anxiety into our bodies and shakes us up, alters self-understanding and experience. Arguably, these experimental spaces that hold the potential for cultural interventions. There is no us and them here and you over there. Affect, the intensity of anxiety, as Moira Gatens writes, leads to “question commonsense notions of privacy or ‘integrity’ of bodies through exposing the breath on the borders between self and other evidenced by the contagious ‘collective’ affects” (115).
the breaches of borders that instigate anxiety? It can feel like something else, foreign, has taken possession of one’s body. What could be very unsettling about affect, Elspeth Probyn states, “radically disturbs different relations of proxim ity: to our selves, bodies, and pasts” (85). Demarcations and boundaries are intruded upon.

My preoccupation is in testing the double role that anxiety is playing: both reproducing distinct and also perforating boundaries. I am arguing that ethical and political action takes place through developing a deep understanding of both the reproduction and breach, and in so doing, I “seem to generate new ways of thinking about how we relate to history and how we wish to live in present” (Probyn 89). In this sense, following scholars of affect and emotion, I want to rework meaning of anxiety and how it is experienced: to shake up the body or rather to generate ethical project from the already shaken body. Different affects, as Probyn writes, “make us write, think and act in different ways” (74). What is shaken up is the sense of one’s own integrity and boundedness – and with it how one relates to and inhabits the world. What is body and how does it relate to other bodies? The inside and outside distinction evaporates. Resilience is a necessary attribute, or skill, to resist the lure of readily available cultural resistance.

I am writing a book about progressive white women’s engagement with Indigenous people, politics, and the anxiety that ensues. The women I write about care. I do not doubt that: I am questioning her as an individual. But I am intrigued by what prevents settler Australians from grappling with Indigenous conatus? After all, “good white women” want social justice. I am positing that settler anxiety issues from encountering the materiality of Indigenous life: or perhaps accurately when the imaginary confronts the material. Thus anxiety signals the potential to experience ethical resilience in the messy materiality of the intercultural.

By examining anxiety that circulates in intercultural spaces, where settlers are pulled into the liveliness of social encounters, I am animated by the possibility of disruptions to the prevailing order of things. My concern with scholarship that examines postcolonial anxiety is that much does so removed from the complexity of immersive engagement. To do so, affords a unifying and critique, which limits and contains intercultural encounters, yet settlers are moved, impressed upon, and made to feel. If one shifts perspective to immanent interactions, messy materialities. Danielle Wyatt writes, one can see where ways of relating and belonging are actively and invar (re)constructed (188). My interest is in the noisy and unruly processes, which potentially disrupt power relations. My wager is that anxiety reveals the embodiment of colonialism but it is also opening, a loosening to a greater capacity to affect and be affected. Social resilience is embracing change, developing positive interdependence, and seeing disturbance as an opportunity for development (Wilson). We have the assets; we just need the will.

References


