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A Meditation on Discomfort

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To borrow from Irene Watson, this is a meditation on discomfort (2007). I begin at a cultural tourism site in northeast Arnhem Land, where Yolŋu women were teaching Napaki (non-Indigenous) women about their kinship systems and responsibilities. The tourists were eager to learn: at times insistent and demanding. There was something too familiar about the scene: the settler women's clawing desire for 'Aboriginal culture', only just keeping at bay the anxiety evoked by Aboriginal autonomy and political will. My concern is that in this historical moment there is a retreat, a wariness to disclose what it feels like to be the beneficiaries of living in a colonised country. It is shaming to discuss these awkward, if not ugly, emotions, and much easier to dismiss these as personal failings, sweep them aside, or to hide behind empathy for so-called vulnerable people or an enthusiasm for 'culture'. Consequently those committed to social justice could fail to understand contemporary Australia, and also disregard an alternative feminist political practice. In this article, I reflect upon what might enable 'good white people' to stay in places of discomfort and be responsive and answerable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people [Watson, Irene. 2007. "Aboriginal Sovereignties: Past, Present and Future (Im)Possibilities." In Our Patch, edited by Suvendrini Perera, 23-44. Curtin, WA: Network Books].

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Keywords: Aboriginal, settler colonial, anxiety, discomfort, cultural tourism, public feelings.
A meditation on discomfort

A few years back, I was undertaking fieldwork at the Garma festival in northeast Arnhem Land, as part of a project examining the significance of cultural festivals for improving Indigenous socio-cultural wellbeing (Phipps and Slater 2010). Garma is cultural diplomacy at work: Yolŋu invite government and non-government agencies, academics and political leaders onto Country to discuss and negotiate issues determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agendas. Alongside the main event, there were a series of other initiatives, one of which was a women’s cultural tourism program. It is fair to say that many attending to core business – the battleground of how to alleviate Indigenous inequality – did not take the tourism program very seriously. Politics has long been gendered, and accordingly the women’s program was dismissed as basket weaving; it literally was basket weaving, amongst other activities. Nonetheless I was fascinated by what was, however personable, a political encounter.

Feminist scholarship has long politicised that which was previously scorned as unworthy of political and intellectual attention: the home, the body, childcare, the list could go on and on. It was clear that many of the ‘serious’ Garma attendees considered the Napaki women participants as naïve tourists who were not interested in, and did not understand, the politics or the harsh realities of Aboriginal life. In this research note, I bring feminist critiques of whiteness and settler colonialism into relation with studies of affect and emotion. The Napaki women’s responses to the cultural tourism program are examples of what Berlant and others have termed ‘public feelings’ (2004): focusing on the way feeling states are part of shared and communal experiences, rather than personal or private sensations (Stephens 2015). One such feeling or emotion is anxiety. Intimate, entangled and highly emotional ‘feminised’ spaces such as the cultural tourism program are political encounters, which provide insights into the complex of
settler ambivalences and conflicts. Focusing upon white women’s emotional responses to Aboriginal people and politics is uncomfortable, to say the least. I am arguing we need to stay with the trouble (Haraway 2010) to enable a deeper understanding of contemporary settler colonialism.

One afternoon I was walking past the cultural tourism program and I couldn’t help myself – I asked if I was welcome. Careful not to step on fingers, toes or hems of skirts, I weaved through the women and found a space. Despite sitting close to the speaker, I strained to hear; too many bodies absorbed the softly spoken lesson. In the crowded women’s shelter Yolŋu women were teaching Napaki women about their kinship systems and responsibilities. The Yolŋu woman giving the lesson patiently explained the intricacy and complexity of the system. She didn’t teach through comparison, but by insisting upon the logic of Yolŋu law and culture. Our role was to observe and listen. She stopped regularly to confer with older Yolŋu women.

She was a talented and experienced teacher. Her delivery was generous: accepting of our limitations and politely refusing Napaki demands for instant understanding. Again, we were reminded that Garma is a meeting place, where conflicts are resolved and bridges are built: a site of diplomacy and sustainability. Questions were taken: why adopt Napaki? Our teacher explained that no one is a stranger and that without family we are lost and alone. My attention wavered between the lessons and the Napaki women’s compulsive curiosity. It was shaming and illuminating. I feared contagion: affects leap from body to body (Gibbs 2002). More hands shot up. Then as if to ask and answer her own question, artist and Elder, Gulumbu Yunupingu took the floor. Yolŋu have been talking about Garma for a long time, she said. She referred to the Napaki ignorance of Yolŋu culture as ‘blindness’. Napaki eyes look, she said,
but can’t see all that is going on. ‘We are the mothers to our children, navigating a new world, we must work together. Yo, turn around and look at Yolŋu people, we are here.’

It remains a galvanizing experience. It disturbed and fascinated me. Gulumbu was identifying a collective blindness: a sort of cultural trachoma. We had travelled a long way, at considerable expense, with a genuine desire to learn from Yolŋu. High up on the Dhupuma plateau, in the beauty and serenity of the stringybark forest, we were grasping at ‘Aboriginal knowledge’ as if our life depended on it, greedily tucking it into our pockets to take back home, like a holiday trinket. Yet we failed to listen, to see. I witnessed, and was implicated in, yet another performance of settler Australians’ inability to meet Aboriginal people on their own terms: to share authority, to give way to another authority. My intellectual curiosity is animated by the deep contradictions, indeed conflict, at the ‘heart’ of progressive settler cultural politics: the desire for vital Indigeneity – strong people and culture – and an end to (neo)colonialism, coupled with an inability to negotiate sovereign autonomous will.

I could, and have, told this story very differently (Slater 2006). Before I first attended Garma I was concerned that many Napaki would receive Yolŋu cultural practices as spectacle: the ontological and epistemological differences lost, devoured by the dominant culture’s voracious appetite to make manageable titbits for easy consumption. Seemingly, Yolŋu cultural practices were received both as an expression of deeper socio-political and spiritual meanings and as a complement to contemporary mainstream values and beliefs. Of course, what one does with this upon returning home is an open and vexed question. When I asked women from the cultural tourism groups why they came to Garma, their responses confounded my prejudices. They spoke of female friends recommending Garma because it had given them an insight and understanding of living Yolŋu culture and a historical perspective different from ‘what they had
learned at school’. What surprised me was that their attendance at Garma was not about fulfilling a spiritual need or accessing ‘authenticity’, or not predominately. Rather, it was part of a process of learning about Australia’s past, present and future or—more accurately—unlearning.

It became clear to me that many Napaki drew sustenance from the strength of the Yolŋu women. Sitting in the women’s shelter, listening to Yolŋu women teach a little of their complex kinship system and connection to country, I observed Napaki women who were, myself included, deeply moved by the Yolŋu women’s generosity and willingness to engage despite the unremitting inequalities and injustice. There were forms of recognition of Yolŋu, which didn’t always induce a turning away, a need to possess, or the too familiar settler anxiety that attends Aboriginal demonstrations of political vitality and self-possession. Where I thought there might have been a yearning for some mythical harmonious place or the romanticising of an ancient culture, there was instead a light intimacy which was restful. It is not that there was not plenty of settler discomfort or clamouring for attention and understanding—clearly my opening indicates otherwise—but there were moments of calm and ease. For many years, I have reflected upon these contrasting performances: the agitation paired with openness and stillness. The Yolŋu women are a catalyst and an ever-present background or presence for settler anxiety, but as is too common in Australia, they are not the central players. My attention is upon Napaki disquiet. Anxiety interrupts and disturbs, and I am arguing that anxiety can be politically potent if it is harnessed to reflect upon what is going on here – not for (poor) me but in settler colonialism’s troubling relationship with Indigenous Australia.

Maybe since Gulumbu’s intervention, I have been trying to follow her line of sight and interrogate settler blindness. It compels my research and has become the central focus of a book
I am writing in which my protagonists are left-leaning settler Australians who want to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and social issues. Rather crudely, I refer to them as ‘good white people’: those who have been profoundly affected by the post-1970s Indigenous rights movement or whose subjectivities have been deeply informed by it. To be more accurate, the focus is good white women. Despite their good intentions, such good white people continue to respond to Indigenous politics and efficacy as a provocation. It produces in them a form of anxiety that is blinding and deafening.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that only white women are anxious. Nor that settler anxiety is a particularly gendered cultural dynamic. But rather I made the choice to focus upon good white women for several reasons, one of which is that as a settler Australian I too am implicated and complicit. Historically white women have had significant involvement in Aboriginal social issues and this has been contentious, their actions often criticised by black activists, feminists and scholars as serving a white feminist socio-political agenda and as failing to understand the history of racism. Despite the contested history of white feminist solidarity (Land 2015, 72), settler and Indigenous women have worked together to secure basic human rights and social justice (see Lake 2001; Paisley 1997; Wilson 1997). Arguably, there is a trace of this history in the cultural tourism program. The inequalities and asymmetries remain, as does the drive for many white women to redress historical wrongs and ongoing injustice. Attention to studies of affect and emotion provide further insights into the concerns of critical Indigenous and settler colonial studies. Feminist scholars have emphasised that ‘experience, perception and intellection are all highly mediated by affective states, rather than the product of “detached reason” or “objective observation”’ (Stephens 2015, 274, drawing upon Pedwell and Whitehead 2012, 112). Feminist histories and politics, as Stephens writes, have become reconceptualised as ‘affective genealogies’.
Such insights have returned me to the concept of settler or postcolonial anxiety. As is well documented, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander testimony detailing colonial violence and ongoing injustice, most significantly in the Stolen Generations Report *Bringing Them Home*, deeply disturbed settler Australians’ sense of belonging and legitimacy. To borrow from Gelder and Jacobs, it ‘turned what seems like “home” into something else, something less familiar and less settled’. They diagnosed these effects as postcolonial anxiety: uncanny Australia (Gelder and Jacobs 1998). Notably, in their work it was the Aboriginal sacred that possessed such unsettling effects. Fast forward twenty to thirty years, many Australians have become comfortable with, if not desiring of, the Aboriginal ‘sacred’ and ‘culture’, and too familiar with Indigenous suffering. Yet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander political will and agency provokes anxiety.

This then—to borrow from Irene Watson (2007)—is a meditation on discomfort. I am not doubting that the settlers I write about care deeply, yet encounters with Aboriginal people’s passions and efficacy are often experienced as painful: disturbing settlers’ sense of self, belonging, ethics and politics. The resulting anxiety—which I argue is an historical subjectivity (Foucault 1997), an emotional territory—shapes perception and orders values, identity and senses of belonging (Ahmed 2014; Highmore 2009; Probyn 2005; Gregg and Seigworth 2010). Anxiety is often perceived as an ugly, undesirable emotion, a sign of a lack of cultivation and self-control; but it is revealing, not so much of the individual as of a cultural dynamic (Pedwell 2014, 56). It is the depersonalisation of anxiety that interests me: emotional states are not private or personal but rather are shared cultural experiences (Stephens 2015, 274). Many settler Australians find Indigenous political agency confronting and it produces conflict, or perhaps what Gulumbu was referring to as blindness. Good white women are impassioned by colonial
injustice, ongoing inequality and marginalisation that effects too many Indigenous lives, and they want to be a part of the solution. But emotions are neither neutral nor de-politicised: they ascribe value and thus rearrange our connections and interactions with the human and more-than-human (Waitt 2014, 669). Emotions are a performance of the cultural politics of inhabitation or ‘world making’ (Ahmed 2004, 12). However, anxiety also registers a confrontation with the unfamiliar, the strange, and interrupts self-mastery (Heidegger 1973). The world turns into something remote and unfamiliar. The subject is rattled, however momentarily, which potentially generates change. One can escape the distress by fleeing into the familiar, the known or seeking reassurance and comfort. But if one stays with the discomfort, a space opens for questioning the taken-for-grantedness of the world.

I want to stay with these bad feelings. Anxiety registers interest: something that is both threatening and captivating. My concern is that in our historical moment, there is a retreat, a wariness to disclose what it feels like to be the beneficiaries of living in a colonised country. It is shaming to discuss these awkward, if not ugly emotions, and much easier to dismiss them as personal failings or hide behind the valorisation of Aboriginal ‘culture’ or a deep empathy for the marginalised (see Pedwell 2014). Consequently we could fail to understand contemporary Australia, and disregard an alternative feminist political practice. My initial interest in the cultural tourism program was curiosity; from the outside it felt like a strange mix of intimacy and a clawing desire to be close to Yolŋu women. Spaces of encounter, such as these, with all that raw, unbridled emotion, are scary and compelling. My ambivalence about the anxious white women is not only because I share some of their anxiety (most obviously), but also because it is only too clear settlers risk being accused of appropriation if one articulates a yearning for a deep association with Aboriginal people, culture and country. Rightly so, there has been a rejection of the self-reflexive and of the emotional self-indulgence of the privileged white woman who is distressed, feels reproached or misunderstood leaving Indigenous women burdened with
comforting her. But there is a danger here. How can good white people understand their desires, if one can only speak of them once they have been made presentable i.e. once passions have been extracted? To understand herself, the good white woman needs to harness her resolve and turn her attention to what she refuses to see, yet feels: the colonial impulse and the force of settler anxiety. As Watson asks, can ‘we move from places where whitefellas feel truly uncomfortable into what I call ‘‘a meditation on discomfort’’ – to places where the settler society is made to answer these questions: what brings them to a place of lawfulness? Or how lawful is their sovereign status?’ (2007, 30).

Settler colonialism is the dispossession and replacement of Indigenous peoples which is justified by narratives of European progress and supremacy. They come, they stay, and ascend to power. A territory is not just waiting to be discovered and claimed, it is constituted through the organisation of people as belonging to that place and time, and others not. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were from the past, and Terra nullius, as Emily Potter argues, ‘went one step further and denied Indigenous presence, even as past’ (2014, 81). Settler colonialism makes Indigenous people out of place: temporally and spatially. Settlers enact territorialisation by identifying as modern subjects – the present and future – thus justifying the right to claim sovereignty and deny Indigenous sovereignty. The country belongs to those who came after – the not colonised, the settler. In contemporary Australia this white possessive logic continues: the nation is figured as a belonging to white settlers (Moreton-Robinson 2005, 22). Moreton-Robinson develops her idea through Hage’s concept of governmental belonging: the nationalist understands her/himself to be central to the nation, and others are objects that need to be managed (Hage 2000, 45). However, she highlights that this mode of inhabitation – possessive logic – is not only the bastion of nationalist conservatives, but also progressives. Indigenous people are managed, and continue to be enfolded into a narrative of European progress, by being imagined as remedial subjects who
are not yet ready for a management role, so to speak. Good white people’s responsibility is to acknowledge the damage colonialism wrought upon Indigenous people and support ‘healing’. Settlers’ sense of belonging and sovereignty is secured, to borrow from Coulthard, ‘by situating the harms of settler-colonialism in the past, and seeking to repair its injurious legacy by making Indigenous subjects the primary object of repair, not the colonial relationship’ (2014, 17).

Like Yolŋu, I think that Napaki entered the space with ethical intentions: a genuine commitment to recognise Yolŋu and create mutually respectful relationships. But nonetheless we do so lugging our emotional histories. Most settlers do not have social relationships with Indigenous Australians (although the reverse is not true), therefore there are few opportunities to reconfigure and reinvent racialised imaginaries. I would argue that this results in a particular conflict in the progressive settler colonial imaginary which compels and immobilises ‘good white Australians’ such that Indigenous political will and difference continue to be experienced as a threat to settler belonging and authority. Yet an imperative of social justice and social transformation – if you like, to exit colonialism – is to learn to live in and with multiple sovereignties (Bignall 2014). Governmental belonging or possessive logic limits settlers’ ability to negotiate sovereign autonomous wills (Hage 2015, 99). Yet the women on the cultural tourism program spoke of being moved by the capacity and vitality of the Yolŋu women, culture and country. Furthermore, Yolŋu reject settler pity or empathy – they are not objects of repair. Like many people, Napaki probably have few cultural resources that enable them to reframe, not so much their experiences, but these disturbing, ugly feelings. After all, they attended the cultural tourism program to learn and to be enriched, not to feel bad about themselves. But collectively reflecting upon those bad feelings affords insights into the continuing hold and harms of settler colonialism.
Irene Watson writes, ‘[i]s there no possibility of a political space to be heard on the concerns we hold as Aboriginal people?’ (Watson 2007, 36). My conjecture is that too often settler colonials cannot hear the hopes, experiences and demands of Indigenous people because to do so would be to share social space genuinely—and the present and future—which threatens colonial sovereignty (Wolfe 2016, 14). So instead they or we continue to worry and fret, while we focus our moral efforts on repairing the ‘broken Aborigine’ rather than transforming the foundations of settler colonialism. In such a cultural dynamic, there is little room for an engagement with incommensurability and Indigenous agency. What is needed, as Watson proposes, is for settlers to be in a place that allows for uncomfortable conversations, but she questions if this is even possible. Maybe it isn’t yet possible; however, feelings circulate, catch us by surprise, disturb us and won’t leave us alone. Feminists have long argued that cultural politics and power relations are embedded in everyday life and social relations, producing our subjectivities, indeed our worlds. My argument is that the prevalence and persistence of settler anxiety in the face of Indigenous political will is very telling. We need to understand the continuance of racialised power relationships and how these are hidden and revealed by emotions: one of which is anxiety.

My interest in the cultural tourism program is not that it is a successful example of decolonisation or relinquishment of white authority. But rather it is an invitation to resolve conflicts and meet Yolŋu on their country and terms. Yet Napaki understand it as a learning, even healing, experience: to learn about Yolŋu culture. What happened to Yolŋu intentions? Yolŋu terms are diplomacy: a meeting of differences which are not so much reconciled as negotiated to create ways to ethically live together. Aboriginal sovereignty threatens a taken-for-granted sense of settler belonging, and a too familiar response is anxiety and panic, but
estrangement is also an interruption, which opens up a space to explore the deep attachment to the possessive logic of settler colonialism (Moreton-Robinson 2006). Settler anxiety is productive because it exposes settlers’ existential crisis: the deep fear of being a body out of place. As Watson advises, we need to stay with the discomfort, thoughtfully meditate upon how settler colonialism reproduces subjects who desire the comforts and security of exclusive possession and limits our capacities to reimagine belonging, and thus social justice. I am suggesting this is a quiet, yet pressing form of feminist political practice. Seemingly for good white people it’s a high stakes game: a threat to one’s self, belonging, and extinguishment of the hoped-for ethical future. But as we know only too well, the threat to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is much more urgent and material. What if bearing anxiety, the existential fear of displacement, is one of the secrets to creating political spaces in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people might be heard?
References


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1 The Traditional Owners of north-eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, Australia.
2 I use the term Indigenous to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
3 The Yolŋu word for non-Indigenous (usually, white) people. The term Balanda is also used interchangeably.
4 Although in writing my book (and in discussion with friends and colleagues) I have reflected upon if there is a particular white women’s pain at refusal or hurt. Note, however, Peter Read in *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (2000), writes of the angst that settler encounters with Indigenous Australia has produced. He is in crisis and cannot reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous sense of belonging. However, as he notes white
anxiety/guilt is not shared by all. He questions if it is socio-economic: ‘Everyone I have quoted so far, so far as I know, is like me: university-educated, urban, middle-class and Anglo-Celtic. Perhaps it is only this group that feels itself to be trapped’ (p.5). See also, Henry Reynolds (1999).


The Stolen Generations were the children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who were, largely, forcibly removed – approx. 1905–1970 – from their families by state and federal government agencies and church missions, under Protection and Assimilation Acts. In 1997 the Bringing Them Home: The 'Stolen Children' Report was handed down to Federal parliament. See https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/bringing-them-home-stolen