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

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

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 here 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 sustenance 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

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M/C Journal, Vol. 16, No. 5 (2013) - 'resilient'**Anxious Settler Belonging: Actualising the Potential for Making Resilient Postcolonial Subjects**<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/705>*Lisa Slater*

i) 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 heat 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 and 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 times the adult self abandons me, leaving me nothing but an awkward adolescent: clumsy, sweaty, too ruddy, 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 the 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 the 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, the 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 this be generative of a kind of resilience, an ethical, postcolonial resilience, which is necessary for figuring up to and intervening in the contingency of colonial power relations in Australia? Affects are telling: deeply embodied cultural knowledge, which is largely invisible, is made present. The political and ethical potential of anxiety is that it registers a confrontation: a test. If resilience is the capacity to be flexible and to successfully overcome challenges, then can settler anxiety be rethought (and indeed be relearned) as signalling an opportunity for ethical intercultural 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 of them. Encounters between Aboriginal and settler Australians are often highly emotional: indeed can render “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 lives 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, rather than 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 disturbance and rupture, which in turn might provide an opportunity for the creation of anti-colonial

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: renewing postcolonial ethics. Scholarship emphasises that resilience is more than an individual quality but is environmental and social, and importantly can be enhanced or taught through experiential interventions (Lafukefu, "Fire"; Howard & Johnson). Why do white settlers become anxious when 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 Indigenous politics and blocking the political by staying in an emotional register and thus resisting the political 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 the above analysis emotions are not the material of proper critique, yet anxiety is named as an articulation of the desire for the restoration of colonial order. Arguably anxiety is a jolt of discomfort and complacency. Anxiety is doing a lot of cultural work. Settler anxiety is thus not a retreat from the political but an everyday modality in which cultural politics is enacted. The political is a potential experiential, experimental site in which progressive settlers can harness their political and ethical will to face up to substantial collective challenges.

Strangely Indigeneity is everywhere. And nowhere. There is the relentless bad news reported 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 common place 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 that political encounters have been replaced by the personal and social: "with contact functioning not as 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 do with experiences of historical or contemporary Indigenous peoples, but rather refer to a particular cultural assemblage and intercultural space that is the product of stories inherited from colonists and colonialism (4-5). The dominance of the assemblage "Aborigine" enables the forgetting of contemporary Indigenous people: everyday encounters, with people or their 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 Indigenous 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 it feeling it circulate in what sometimes seemed the most unlikely places. Imagine: forty or fifty "progressive" white Australians have travelled to a remote part of Australia for a cultural tour. A few days in, we gather to hear an Elder discuss the impact and pain of, what was formally known as the Northern Territory Intervention. He speaks openly and passionately, and yes, politically. W

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. Anxiety 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 meaninglessness (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: adverse 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 of postcolonial anxiety exposes the embodiment of colonialism and, surprisingly, models for reforming colonial social relations. White pain, raw emotions and an inability to remain self possessed in the face of Indigenous conatus is telling; it is a productive space for understanding why settler 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 answer or offers absolution. But rather if there is so much anxiety then what has it to tell us. Importantly, I think it gives us something to work with, to be otherwise. Does anxiety hold the potential to be redirected to more productive, ethical exchanges and modes of belonging? If 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 I 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 "change and disturbance rather than denying or constraining it" (Walker & Salt 147). I will argue that anxiety is the registering of hazard. Albeit in extremely different circumstances than where resilience thinking is commonly evoked, which is most often responses to natural disasters (Wilson 1219). Settler Australians are not under threat or a vulnerable population. I am in no way 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 may provide an opportunity for positive change and an undoing of colonial relations (Wilson 1221).

Understanding community resilience, according to Wilson, as the conceptual space at the intersection between economic, social and environmental capital is helpful for trying to conceptualise the knotty, power laden and intransigence of settler and Indigenous relations (1219). Wilson emphasises that social resilience is about the necessity of people, or in his terms, human 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" (1221), resilience, according to Ungar, is the protective processes that individuals, families and 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 settler anxiety might be a strange protective factor that prevents, or indeed represses, settlers from engaging more positively with intercultural disturbance ("Researching" 387). Surely in unsettled 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 our 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 are 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 that anxiety is not caused by the loss of an object "but is fundamentally the affect that signals when the Other is too close, and the order of symbolization (substitution and displacement) is at risk of 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 and Rollo May argued that anxiety should be depathologized. Anxiety indicates vitality: a struggle against non-being. Not simply a threat of death but more so, meaninglessness (May 15). And as they argue, it is a modern phenomenon, and thus emerged as a central concern of contemporary philosophers. Anxiety, as Kierkegaard held, "is always to be understood as orientated to freedom" (qtd May 37). Or as he famously wrote, "the dizziness of freedom" (Kierkegaard 138) the possibilities of life, and more so the human capacity for self-awareness of life's potential to imagine, dream, visualise a different, however unknown, future, self – and the potential, although not ensured, to creatively actualise these possibilities brings with it anxiety. "Anxiety is the affect that structures the structure of feeling that is inherent in the act of transition", as Homi Bhabha writes, but also the affect of freedom (qtd 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". Although inadvertently, anxiety embraces a state of "unsettled negotiation" by refusing imperious demands of totalizing discourses, and in this sense is an important political tactic of "hybridization" (126). Drawing on 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 there is anxiety there is hope. Bhabha refers to this as anxious freedom. The subject is painfully aware of her indeterminacy. Yet this is where possibility lies, or as Bhabha writes, there is no access to minority politics without a painful "bending" toward freedom (130). In the antagonism is the 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 that generates potential for change but also unsettles, producing the anxious white body. Anxiety enters into our bodies and shakes us up, alters self-understanding and experience. Arguably, these are 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 us to "question commonsense notions of privacy or 'integrity' of bodies through exposing the breaches 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 proximity: 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 "seek to generate new ways of thinking about how we relate to history and how we wish to live in the present" (Probyn 89). In this sense, following scholars of affect and emotion, I want to rework the meaning of anxiety and how it is experienced: to shake up the body or rather to generate an 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* bodily integrity and boundedness – and with it how one relates to and inhabits the world. What is the 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 more 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 of it 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 invariably (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 about embracing change, developing positive interdependence, and seeing disturbance as an opportunity for development (Wilson). We have the assets; we just need the will.

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