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# Indigenous Subjectivity in Australia: Are we Queer?

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# Indigenous Subjectivity in Australia: Are we Queer?

## **Abstract**

The introduction of queer theory in Australian Indigenous contexts presents powerful possibilities and challenging complexities; for the building of new histories, the inhabiting of the historical space, the “queering” of ideas of blood, family, community and lineage, and the limits of “being” and “doing” as they relate to bodies and genders. Queer First Nations people in settler-colonial contexts, particularly in Turtle Island, have begun to draw on Queer theory to extend their understandings of colonialism and Indigenous sexualities. This paper will explore this move towards queer theory and analysis, in particular examining the recent introduction of the “subjectless critique” to Indigenous studies, changing the terms of engagement with colonialist histories and structures to argue that colonialism is a system of normativity which “queers” settlers and Indigenous people alike. The paper will challenge this mode of critique and contextualise it within Australian Indigenous studies, drawing on feminist theory, queer theory, decolonisation theory and critical race studies. It will also explore the politics of naming our experiences and histories as 'queer' given the western history and exclusivity of the term and the community surrounding it. This calls into question the politics of reclamation; of language, history, and embodiment, and demands a reading of Indigenous gender and sexuality under regimes of global colonialism.

# Indigenous Subjectivity in Australia: Are We Queer?

Maddee Clark

Queer Indigenous Studies highlight some of the key points of tension within the fields of Indigenous Studies and queer and trans theory. The knowledges of Indigenous queer and trans people in academic institutions are often limited in their scope by the structures they work within and against. Disciplines with a focus on the epistemic mobilisations of various identities, as Green and Ellison write of Black and trans feminisms and their relationship to white feminism, “enter the...terrain by marking its conceptual limits, its inability to account for those who are disappeared, or who are only taken up as marginalized tokens of diversity” (2014, p. 223).

With the intent to critically assess the field of Indigenous Studies, Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that it must move away from a limiting focus on cultural difference. She challenges, “...has the intellectual investment in defining our cultural differences resulted in the valuing of our knowledges? Has the academy become a more enlightened place to work, and, more important, in what ways have our communities benefitted?” (Moreton-Robinson 2015, p. xvii). Similarly, Andrea Smith points out that being limited to ethnicised modes of critique constitutes an ethnographic entrapment for Indigenous scholars. “Native studies is generally ethnographically entrapped within the project of studying Natives” (2011, p. 44). The continual positioning of Aboriginal scholars as the bearers of cultural knowledge about Aboriginal people(s) works to contain Aboriginal critique to a trope of emergence, which trans scholar Regina Kunzel argues “can also be an infantilizing temporality that communicates (and contributes to) perpetual marginalization. An emergent field is always on the verge of becoming, but it may never arrive” (Kunzel 2014, p. 285).

By contrast, Sandy Stone, a transgender academic suggests that disciplines like Trans Studies and Queer Indigenous Studies are ways we can begin to “read oneself aloud” (2014, p.92). Indigenous Studies has the ability to become “exogenous”, that is, escaping the entrapment described by Smith (2011) and forming critiques which are not merely limited to the infantilising project of describing the ‘body’ of the other within colonialism, but which fully develop the critical capacities for Indigenous knowledge, philosophy and analysis (Moreton-Robinson 2015, p. xvii). According to Gayatri Spivak (2012) much of postcolonial cultural studies is premised on colonised peoples making attempts to “question and correct their masters” and to rewrite the relationship of Indigenous people to elite Euro-American knowledges which are positioned as “transparent and capable of reporting on all cultures” (2012, pp. 119-120). In response, Aboriginal scholars ask the academy to

think about the limits of knowing and the epistemology of those who profess to know. Aborigines have often been represented as objects — as the ‘known’. Rarely are they represented as subjects, as ‘knowers’...it is academics who represent themselves as ‘knowers’ whose work and training is to ‘know’. They have produced knowledge about Indigenous people but their way of knowing is never thought of by white people as being racialised despite whiteness being exercised epistemologically (Moreton-Robinson 2004, p.75).

Moreton-Robinson’s later work continues to urge this focus on a critique of the epistemological functioning and positioning of white knowledges.

Conversely, Trans Studies is struggling with how to place itself in relation to decolonisation projects globally. Stryker and Currah (2015) believe that the “transgender imaginary” risks misrecognising

different configurations of embodiment, identity, desire, and subjectivity for points on a map whose prime meridian runs through the United States, whose road signs are in English, whose background color is white, whose cardinal directions are man, woman, homosexual, and heterosexual, and upon which transgender is imagined as movement across the borders of this gridded space. (2015, p. 305)

Indigenous queers in Australia are going through a crisis of ‘recognition’ which bears some similarity to this. While the politics of the Recognise<sup>1</sup> campaign for constitutional recognition are hotly debated within Indigenous communities, trans Aboriginal people are also beginning to articulate our identities within the colonial queer and trans communities in which we live and relate. In addition to asking important questions about how Indigenous trans people are recognised and reimagined according to the desires and limits of colonialism, Currah and Stryker ask how liberatory queer politics and theory can occur through the term transgender “grounded as it is in conceptual underpinnings that assume a sex/gender distinction as well as an analytic segregation of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression that are simply foreign to most places and times?” (2015, p. 303). These questions about the potential of Indigenous studies and trans studies to both challenge and to reify epistemic violence, heteronormative knowledge systems and institutions, highlight tensions inherent in collaborating with both grassroots queer, trans and Indigenous community and institutional knowledges. They also urge me to think about how to transcend the boundaries of neoliberal academic knowledge accumulation, and move more into the kinds of generative intellectual work which calls things into being and which serves as the catalyst for action.

Indigenous people globally are concerned with how research about us and involving us is conducted. Being a part of both queer and trans non-Indigenous community and the Indigenous community, collaboration and relationships are a necessary part of life. It feels like the space around us in Australia is expanding, even while existing government supports for Indigenous run services, mental health and suicide prevention, and anti-discrimination measures is torn down more every day. The community makes room. Collaboration, solidarity and intersectional organising are sore points I don’t think I know how to grapple with yet. Non-Indigenous trans woman Starlady’s appearance during TEDx Sydney<sup>2</sup>, speaking of her work in collaboration with Indigenous people, for example, provoked debate among the trans and Aboriginal communities about the nature of collaboration and solidarity-in particular, whether the trans community or the Indigenous community could better speak for Indigenous Trans/Sistergirl and Brotherboy community, and whether certain kinds of relationships could be ‘approved’. Indigenous people (including cis people) are rightly protective of Indigenous knowledge and suspicious of any and all claims of “engagement” and “consultation” coming from non-Indigenous people. There isn’t much that we take less seriously than a white person trying to say to us, “you need us”. But Aboriginal cisgendered

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the Recognise campaign see, <http://www.recognise.org.au/>

<sup>2</sup> To view Starlady’s Tedx presentation see, <http://tedxsydney.com/LIVE/?s=135#&panel1-2>

people also dominate discussion and do still speak on our behalf. Sometimes this is consensual and sometimes it's not.

Not long after beginning this piece, I watched Matthew Warcus' (2014) film *Pride* in which he documents the political alliance between London-based activist group Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) and striking Welsh miners during the 1984-85 British miner's strike. I had an incredible feeling of *deja vu* during the final scene of the movie. The members of London LGSM show up at the 1985 London Pride march with their home-painted, pro-miner banners only to be told by an organiser that they are not to march with political banners, and to move to the back of the march. Only the positive and non-critical material is to be out in front, while the overly-political content is to be out of sight. The campaigners are marked as the ugly and unfriendly side of the Pride movement. In 2011, I witnessed an incident at the Melbourne Pride march in St Kilda which mirrored this scene almost word-for-word; the only difference was that the issue at hand was not solidarity with miners, but queer refugees and asylum seekers living under the mandatory detention laws in Australia. Upon arriving with home-made banners, badges, and signs with pro-refugee slogans, a group of (largely non-white and gender-diverse) student activists and I were called socialists and asked to leave. When we argued, a white cisgendered gay man shouted at us that we were not welcome and were too political. We were forced to move to a back section of the march. Rea Saunders, writing in *Peopling the Empty Mirror*, explores the problems of coalition organising in environments where inevitable racial and gendered power dynamics come into play:

We have to confront honestly our own racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism and acknowledge the difference between us...coalition politics can only be effective if all people involved are at an equal level. I am not interested in coalition politics where men still run things (Holland et al. Gays and Lesbians Aboriginal Alliance, 1993).

Damien Riggs is one of several settler scholars who consider the ways that white settler queers have historically been encouraged to invest in the white Australian nation via their possessive investment in settler colonialism:

Thus every time the government threatens to curtail our rights, we reaffirm our possessive investment by conforming to the 'aspirational practices' which suggest we can have 'equality with' the white heterosexual majority. In contrast to this, I would propose that maintaining such investments perpetuates a disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty (Riggs 2007, p. 114).

Going beyond the idea that coalitions *could* be run with everyone on an equal playing field – in order to develop what is referred to as 'coalition politics' in *Peopling the Empty Mirror* – queer Australian discourse must begin to articulate the relationship between settler colonialism and LGBTIQ identities, subjectivities and histories. Queer Australia must begin to understand not only racism and homonormativity within the LGBTIQ community, but also the underlying relationship between sexuality and the racialised white nation, and how that relationship has travelled through all of frontier and post-federation history and into the present.

For example, around the time of the 2011 Melbourne Pride confrontation, it was reported that a number of claimants in Australia seeking asylum based on LGBT persecution were being

asked questions by authorities assessing their claims about whether or not they enjoyed listening to Madonna and Elton John, or reading Oscar Wilde, and about how and how often they had sex, and whether they were members of any public LGBT organisations. Such questions were often accompanied by highly invasive requests for ‘evidence’ in order to fulfil the official requirements for assessing claims based on persecution because of their sexuality. Jennifer Millbank’s 2011 study noted that “in an alarming number of cases tribunal members used highly stereotyped and westernised notions of ‘gayness’ as a template against which the applicants were judged” (Millbank 2011, p. 114). This brings into question the implication of western subcultural assumptions on what it means to experience being lesbian or gay. It also reveals the ways in which ambiguous cultural norms around homosexuality could become a means for the white nation to further articulate its borders in times when border protection is publicly politicised. The impact of the dialectical relationship between sexuality and nation in Australia since what is now commonly referred to as the formal end of the white Australia policy in the 1970s requires more investigation within queer politics. In particular, queer scholars must consider how policies around reconciliation, multicultural tolerance, mandatory detention, intervention, Native Title, and so on, reflect this relationship.

**About the author:** Maddee Clark has lived and worked in Boonwurrung country (Melbourne) since 2009 and currently works in the Australian Indigenous Studies department of the University of Melbourne teaching Indigenous studies. She has been published in *Artlink* and *Overland Literary Journal*, presented at the *Reading the Country: Thirty Years On* festival held in 2014, hosted the 3-day symposium *Austracism: Racial Literacy and Critical Whiteness Studies*, and presented at the Network of Women Students Australia 2014 conference at Edith Cowan University. Maddee is Bundjalung, queer and gender diverse.

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