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Disturbing Sexuality

For the past twenty-two years I have worked with members of a small indigenous community, Belyuen, and their relatives who live along the coastal region of northwestern Australia. From this perspective, I have written about a certain impasse in liberal politics of cultural recognition and about the multiple double binds and capacitating possibilities that emerge from it. I have tried to show that this impasse and its social consequences arise not from liberalism's bad faith but from its strongest ethical impulse to embrace difference. Some of the central questions I have sought to answer include these: How does a specific structure of liberal recognition reproduce rather than disrupt networks of power that negatively ramify on my friends at Belyuen? Are these harms external to the logic of cultural recognition or internal to it? How do they relate to a specific nonpassage between liberal deliberative sense and liberal moral sense?

These conceptual questions mask a question that may seem to some more personal: why do I care about these harms, here, with these people, rather than some other set of harms, some other group of people, elsewhere? One answer is that I have witnessed the debilitating and capacitating

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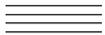
effects of cultural recognition on people whom I have known quite intimately for some time now. This answer, however, prompts other questions: Why do I know them so intimately? Why do I return to Belyuen year after year? After all I live a rich queer life in the United States that is disrupted by these periodic visits. And, to complicate matters, some of my closest friends at Belyuen do not think homosexuality is a viable way of life. So what's up with all this "going bush"? Why not study closer to home, where I can be fully me?

One response would reduce these personal peregrinations to the manifestations of disciplinary power. Modern anthropological method has stereotypically rested on a bout of "fieldwork" ("participant observation"). Fieldwork once meant traveling to a remote place and staying there for a year or so. The more toxic and distasteful the fieldwork, the tighter it tied the researcher to the disciplinary imaginary. This may not be the case any longer—fieldwork is now often multisited, proximate to power, comfortable, and collaborative—but granting agencies and PhD programs continue to be organized around the rhythm of a "year or so." After that year, anthropologists establish different kinds of relations with the people with whom they have worked. Some people keep in touch and periodically visit. Some don't. From a professional anthropological viewpoint, then, it is neither completely bizarre nor all that normal for me to have spent twenty-two years returning to Belyuen annually, watching kids being born and growing into adults, people aging and dying, community politics morphing and iterating, national discourses shifting and bobbing.

The disciplinary response to why I have returned to Belyuen is easier to swallow in some ways than another equally true response—namely, that this relationship and my entry into anthropology were the result of friendship, a friendship that existed before I became an anthropologist, and a way of doing anthropology based on friendship. I wasn't an anthropologist when I first arrived at Belyuen. I didn't know there was such a thing as anthropology, let alone know what it encompassed. I also didn't know when I began returning to Belyuen as an anthropologist that rooting research and theory in friendship increases rather than lessens the ethical, theoretical, and political stakes of acting and writing. Friendship cannot abrogate the racial, national, or sexual discourses in which and through which they and I meet. Nor are these discourses repealed by the fact that "friendship" signifies awkwardly at Belyuen, where kinship is the presupposed background of social relations. People there tell me to experience my relationship to

them in kinship terms, and in fact I have developed deeper familial relations with them than with my family of birth: I feel obliged to show up for them in ways I wouldn't show up for my other family. Nevertheless, neither friendship nor its translation into kinship can neutralize the fact that discourses and imaginaries of race, nation, and sexuality do not merely show up in my relationship with people at Belyuen but are internal to the construction of the scene itself. All of this ramifies awkwardly when moved into a nationalized and internationalized politics of representation. Which makes me less irritated than amused when I am "reminded" by some critics that there is an inherent differential between a scholar from the North and subjects from the South; that it is not clear whether we can learn anything foundational about a national discursive order from the perspective of a small, regionally marginal place; and that there is something suspect about using anything that smacks of queer theory (or sexuality) to understand the discursive constitution of indigeneity.

In other words, Andrew Parker and Janet Halley's request that I—and other authors in this special issue—consider how my research on "non-sexual" topics relates to my research on "sexual" topics touched on a number of problems that have long knotted together my academic and personal life. I am going to take advantage of the editors' offer in order to reflect on some of the problems of sexual and nonsexual identification and legibility that animate two scenes of sociality—scenes of U.S. homosexuality and scenes of Belyuen geophysicality—and on how these scenes have shaped my critical approach to liberal recognition and queer theory.



We can begin with the dynamics of interpellation: "Ah, that's me!"—the prototypical scene of subjectivation in which "we were seeking each other before we set eyes on each other."¹ "That's me," I thought, when I saw two women kissing in Santa Fe, New Mexico. "This is me," I thought when I went hunting with a group of women and men from Belyuen. But what is "this" and "that"?—an identity, a mode of life, a form of association? Surely I was hailed in both. But as surely, I was not hailed into an equivalent social form or mode of being. When I said, looking at Codey and Tasha kissing, "That's me," I found waiting at the end of the demonstrative an intelligible identity organized by a language game, widely available to others with whom I interacted. I am gay; this is homosexuality. When I said, "This is me," as I slogged through a dense mangrove with friends from Belyuen coopera-

tively and competitively looking for mud crabs, what identity dangled at the end of this? Was it an identity—some awkward agglutinated nominal form, “kin-being-in-the-woods”—or an Arendtian mode of being together in activity? But what is that? How can I convey what that is to others? And how can I constellate an identity around it? I could provide more and more personal context that would overflow the awkwardly hinged term *kin-being-in-the-woods* and would suggest why I felt addressed by this mode of being together. I could describe how my eldest sister raised my siblings and me in such a way that “the woods” became the protective brace against domestic peril. I could then go on to describe how these ways of being together in the woods became layered into another familial story: my grandparent’s insistence that our real home was a small kin-based village, Carisole, in the Italian Alps. But no matter how these nativity scenes overdetermined the identifications that felt like recognition when I first showed up at Belyuen, they do not provide me with an available name for this mode of social being. Nor do I think that they should—that the ethical, political, or social task is to find an identity that can retroactively constitute the truthful name of this mode of life that so rivets me.

Even if a nominal form lay at the other end of my outstretched arm, retroactively constituting who I am and understand myself to be, the practical way that my Belyuen friends and I are in the world is hardly equivalent. In part, this is due to the noncorrespondence of the components of our coming into being. Simply, what I am seeing and identifying in this scene is not there in some objective sense, nor is it what my friends are seeing. Even though Belyuen friends and I share narratives about the tremendous violence of domesticity, an orientation to “the bush/the woods” as a subjective and social resource and comfort, and an ideology of kinship-based homelands, these narratives, orientations, and ideologies are not equivalent. The conditions of my family and its violences and their families and their violences are not the same. Carisole is not Belyuen. Sexualities built out of forms of stranger sociability cannot be translated without serious distortion into sexualities built out of forms of kinship sociability. This is the case for my friends at Belyuen and me.

Take, for instance, a scene on a beach near Belyuen some seventeen years ago. As we were fishing along a creek, a girl, Anna, declared to another girl, and to everyone gathered around, that when she grew up she was going to marry her *menggen*. *Menggen* is a kinship term referring to all of one’s mothers’ brothers’ daughters or fathers’ sisters’ daughters. *Menggen*

are referred as “wives” in the local Aboriginal English and are the structural equivalent of *panen* (“husbands”: mothers’ brothers’ sons and fathers’ sisters’ sons). A mother of Anna—who was about twenty years old at the time—corrected her daughter, saying that girls marry boys, not other girls, to which Anna replied, turning to her grandmother, “Neh, I can marry her. I call her wife. I can marry her. Eh Nana?”² Anna’s grandmother, who was sitting nearby, agreed, saying, “That’s her wife, that’s her proper *menggen*, finished, you can’t make them different.” The older women’s statement did not end the argument, for Anna’s mother retorted, “Old lady, you don’t understand, that’s different, that’s not *menggen*, that lesbian.” For Anna’s grandmother, these were absolutely different social skins, but not the way her daughter had suggested: “No, no, don’t say that, you’re wrong yourself, you say *menggen*, you say *wife*, that girl can play with that other girl, that not lesbian, that *menggen*.” One doesn’t translate these forms of sexuality. One passes from one language game and the dense discursive and habitual matrixes that support it to another.

Of course, friendship is not reducible to an identity or a mode of life or the processes of identification that animate these, even if a friendship found its origins there. I can certainly identify with a mode of life and yet find no one I consider a friend within that space of being together. Moreover, in friendship we may find ourselves obligated to one another in ways that disrupt habitual forms of identity and identification. This is certainly the case with my friendship with men and women at Belyuen. The more deeply I am awake to the demands of this personal relation, the more I seem personally implausible, my political allegiances awkward to others and myself. If I locate myself within a world of stranger sociality and the sexuality it entails, then I have separated myself from them. But I also separate myself from myself because at this point who I am is unimaginable outside these twenty-two years of being in this family. They have disturbed me. They disturb me not merely because they live in a world of kinship or because they are homophobic but because I find retrospectively that being bound to my friends and family along the coast means that I can neither be with them nor with myself easily anymore. The incommensurate nature of these social worlds and of the racial and sexual discourses that apprehend them make it difficult for me to do such normal things as express joy and grief in one world for the people I have found and lost in another, and for me to make sense of my insertion in either. I can relate, and as a result I am disturbed. Here we begin to touch the depersonalizations of identification

(and self-expressivity) that so interested Leo Bersani and Candace Vogler, but outside of sex, gender, and other available modes of associations.³

In some ways, the above discussion simply reiterates a well-known point: All identities are vulnerable and disturbed by the play of citationality. But in saying this, we have only just begun. We have merely chalked the starting line of our social analysis. Beyond the typical problems of indeterminacy and hermeneutic horizons lie other sources of disturbance. It is certainly true that my Belyuen friends are as disturbed in their identities as I am. But something different organizes how we are disturbed and how these disturbances will matter in our social lives. When I began looking at the social matrixes that stood between us, I was confronted not with sexuality, race, or nationalism per se but with the discourses of individual freedom and social constraint—what I have been calling autological and genealogical discourses—that animate and en flesh love, sociality, and bodies; that operate as strategic maneuvers of power whose purpose or result is to distribute life, goods, and values across social space; and that contribute to the hardness of liberalism as a normative horizon. At stake was not merely their and my interpellation into social nominations or modes of being, but how their and my modes of being were always already enclosed within these two discursive grids.

By *autological discourse* I mean to refer to discourses, practices, and fantasies of self-making, self-sovereignty, and the value of individual freedom, and by *genealogical discourses* I mean to refer to discourses, practices, and fantasies of inheritances of various sorts as constraints on the self-actualizing subject. These discourses figure not simply the frameworks of freedom and its other, but of time and the Other. Of course, the use of time as a method of disciplining others within the liberal diaspora has interested postcolonial critics, including myself, for some time now. Johannes Fabian first demonstrated the role time played in anthropological figurations of the Other, such that people living in the same time and thickly engaged in relations of war, trade, marriage, and death were figured as living in two very different times and spaces.⁴ What seems quite clear is that this anthropological imaginary emerged from and migrated into modes of colonial governance and into modes of postcolonial recognition. Indeed, difference itself is saturated with an injunction about time and the voice—whose voice is marked by past, present, and future time—as a condition of material and authorial distribution. Thus, for instance, Gayatri Spivak has argued that the very enunciative structure of “speaking as” embeds the subaltern subject in her corporeal heritage.⁵

Discourses of autology and genealogy allow people in the liberal diaspora to articulate their most intimate relations to their most robust governmental and economic institutions; make sense of how others do the same; account for the internal incoherence of these discourses; and distribute life and death internationally. This hardly means that the sense and meaning of “autology” and “genealogy” remain the same in the different language games in which they are deployed. Indeed, these discourses are not compelling because of the certainty or consistency of their referent. They are compelling because they function as a diagram: at one and the same time these positions fit together, interpret, orient, and provide a means of moving among an array of disparate phenomena and organize these disparate phenomena into a definite field of values. They make sense of how our intimate relations relate to our political and economic actions, and how they differ from the ways other people do these things. Not only does this diagram allow unlike phenomena to be made alike or not depending on how the context is secured; it also constitutes identities as such and as apprehensible by law and governance.

When we track the care with which liberal discrimination (otherwise known as the practice of “recognizing difference”) proceeds, it becomes clearer how this temporal structure articulates the nonsexual and sexual aspects of social life. This is particularly clear if we think of time not as a set of moving moments that we can fast forward or reverse but as a set of structuring fantasies about the destinations of two forms of social association. Take, for instance, my earlier remark that my Belyuen friends insist that I think of our relation in familial terms because kinship is the presupposed background of their intimate social relations. The more a person acts on the basis of proper kinship, the deeper their truth as a moral subject. This doesn't mean that the language of friendship is never heard at Belyuen. If someone wishes to exit the conditioning discipline of kinship—or violate a social relation of kinship—friendship is now an available way of switching, and signaling that one is switching, language games and the social worlds they index and bring into being. Friendship leaves the realm of kinship, but it leaves it in a different way than I leave it when I say of my American sisters that they are true friends to me. I am signaling that a deeper, truer form of human relationship among us has occurred. They are not.

My friends at Belyuen and I may play among incommensurate hierarchies of moral obligation and social truth, but we are all playing in the present and maneuvering among the discursive languages of association available to us. The state of recognition does not merely want to witness

different ethical practices within moral frameworks. It also demands that these practices and frameworks reference a set of ancient rules, beliefs, and practices that predate the settler nation; be based on abstract principles that do not demand an actual relationship with indigenous peoples; and provide the bureaucratic order with disciplinary certainty. Contemporary indigenous men and women are asked to cart into the contemporary nation (the nation they live in) a “beyond the nation” and “before the nation”—not the harms national time has done and continues to do to them, but a lost indeterminable object, separate and separable from the often messy flows among modes of being in late liberalism.

This way of apprehending the indigenous subject is not restricted to Australia. In a number of recent U.S. court cases, the exemption from prosecution for the religious ingestion of Schedule One drugs has pivoted on the difference between the self-determining and genealogically determined subject. For instance, *State of Utah v the Mooneys* (2004) considered whether the amendments to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1994) restricted the drug exemption to “an Indian” engaged in “bona fide traditional ceremonial purposes in connection with the practice of a traditional Indian religion” or applied to anyone who was a member of the Native American Church. In other words, was the exemption based on the freedom of religious association or on the determinations of traditional and racial inheritance? The State of Utah argued that the Mooneys, though recognized members of the Native American Church, were not exempted from state prosecution for the religious use of peyote because they were not members of a federally recognized tribe—they lacked the government seal of genealogical determination. The Utah Supreme Court disagreed, ruling that the exemption applied to all members of the Native American Church irrespective of racial identity. They did so by interpreting the Utah Controlled Substances Act under an earlier regulatory protocol that did not restrict the exemption to “an Indian.” They did so even as the federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) sought to tighten the relationship between corporeal inheritance (race) and symbolic inheritance (religious customs) in order to restrict the scope of religious exemptions for criminally defined acts. If the DEA has its way, communities of faith will file into their pews under the signs of freedom and inheritance.

The state of recognition hardly restricts its gaze to indigenous worlds. Wherever the force of liberal law needs to be justified, we can expect discourses of the autological subject and the genealogical society to arrive on

the scene. In President George W. Bush's recent address to National Endowment for Democracy on the topic of terrorism and Islam, all three of these orders of the social—the gendered intimate, the religious, and the course of history—were evoked. Comparing “radical Islam” to communism, the speech Bush read (but surely did not write) insists that this form of religion not only seeks to ban books, desecrate historical monuments, and brutalize women but seeks all of these at once because it fears freedom:

By fearing freedom—by distrusting human creativity, and punishing change, and limiting the contributions of half the population—this ideology undermines the very qualities that make human progress possible, and human societies successful. The only thing modern about the militants' vision is the weapons they want to use against us. The rest of their grim vision is defined by a warped image of the past—a declaration of war on the idea of progress, itself. And whatever lies ahead in the war against this ideology, the outcome is not in doubt: Those who despise freedom and progress have condemned themselves to isolation, decline, and collapse. Because free peoples believe in the future, free peoples will own the future.⁶

Of course, free people open the future only to some. And by restricting who will have access to the future and on what terms, these people of freedom find themselves awkwardly interned in the past and their own carnal conditions. Take, for instance, recent debates in the United States over gay marriage. Many people who have argued for the extension of marriage rights to homosexual couples note that gays and lesbians base their unions on the same principles as heterosexuals—a love that may feel more like a compulsion than a choice but is, nevertheless, free. One of the arguments for denying the state institution of marriage to gays and lesbians is that marriage in its very nature is a “societal institution that represents, symbolizes and protects the inherently reproductive human relationship.”⁷ In claiming marriage rights based on the freedom of the subject from and over his or her body, proponents of same-sex marriage have prompted some of its opponents to inter the truth of heterosexuality in the constraint of the body, to carnalize it in a truth resistant to freedom as such.

In short, as I shuttled back and forth between various queer spaces in the United States and indigenous lifeworlds in northwestern Australia, this diagram of differences shuttled along with me. After a while it seemed clear that autological and genealogical discourses were not different in

kind, even though they are used to differentiate kinds of people, societies, and civilizational orders. They both presuppose a liberal humanist claim that what makes us most human is our capacity to base our most intimate relations, our most robust governmental institutions, and our economic relations on mutual and free recognition of the worth and value of another person, rather than basing these connections on, for example, social status or the bare facts of the body. These presuppositions circulate through the subjects and institutions of liberal settler colonies, informing how people talk about themselves and others, how they govern themselves and others, and who they think they are or who they think they should be. As people go about their ordinary lives—their practices of love, work, and civic life—they continually constitute these discourses as if the discourses were the agents of social life, as if there were such a thing as the sovereign subject and the genealogical society, as individual freedom and social constraint, and as if the choice between these Manichaeic positions were the only real choice available to us. They do this as if all other actual and potential positions and practices were impractical, politically perverse, or socially aberrant. And they do so even as the peoples of freedom are constantly constraining various parts of other people's freedom, where these others challenge their own "warped vision" of the past. After all, this was one reason Bush was addressing the National Endowment for Democracy: to move attention away from his nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court by reassuring social conservatives that they—and not the advocates of women's reproductive freedoms and gay rights—held the key to the definition of *freedom*.

These meanderings across the politics of recognition and their discursive grounds have changed how I think about sexuality studies. First, they have forced me to pay more attention to the ways in which queer and gender theory are themselves animated by the dynamic of individual freedom and social constraint. Bidy Martin touched on this dynamic in her analysis of the distribution of these qualities in theoretical construction of gender and sexuality.⁸ Michael Warner and others have more or less explicitly evoked the same dynamic in the critique of the normative politics of gay marriage.⁹ Both have tried to understand how rooting a gay politics in discourses of the self-actualizing subject participates in the fantasy projection of the specter of the genealogical society—or not.

Second, examining how liberal politics of recognition are animated by these discourses of freedom and constraint has led me to look more closely

at social experiments that reflexively resist their Manichaeian choice. Lisa Duggan, for instance, has insisted that we remember not only that decisions about who we marry are inextricably about a larger network of social kinship and friendship but also that many people are seeking to organize and capture public resources and legal rights on the basis of a multiplicity of forms of social desire stretching beyond the conjugal couple.¹⁰ And a number of filmmakers from the global South have explored how to think about and portray the compulsions of family honor and shame outside the Manichaeian choice of autology and genealogy. For example, *Late Marriage* (Koshashvili, 2001), *Head-On* (Akin, 2004), and *Rana's Wedding* (Abu-Assad, 2002) struggle to explore the dynamic of intimacy and arranged marriage, directly engaging presuppositions about self-authored love and the family, while attempting to articulate a new visual and emotional language that refuses the global North as a referent.



Finally, I have been forced to examine once again a structure of mimesis that continually throws queer politics off its radical axis. On my reading, a certain literalism of the referent has hovered over Euro-American studies of sexuality as they opened themselves to their transnational conditions.¹¹ The study of “woman,” “third world women,” “men,” “the third sex,” “new masculinities,” “gay worlds,” “lesbian worlds,” and “straight worlds,” and the globalization of the hetero/homo binary were considered to be the proper object of those scholars, academic programs, and activists who study sexuality and gender as transnational phenomena. Progressive politics and scholarship addressing, for example, indigenous worlds, the international division of labor, emergent Islamic theocracies and reformations, fundamentalist Christian social politics, postcolonial racializations, and other aspects of social life not explicitly self-characterizing as sexuality or gender per se tend to enter sexuality studies either through a grammar of concatenation or through a transformational grammar of pleasure, desire, and sexual identity. For all the good these studies have done (and I think they have done tremendous good), they have also literalized queer attachments. The different ways that friendship meets a sexuality already animated by discourses of the free subject and constrained by society presents a real challenge to sexuality studies defined by the dynamic of identity and interpellation. Rather than judging the appropriateness of social relations, identifications, and identities on the basis of their proximity to a

disciplinary name—sexuality, queer, gender studies—perhaps we might base their appropriateness on the degree to which, in disturbing identities and identifications, in pushing against legibility, they illuminate how these relations and identities are held in a larger social matrix itself separating people and placing them on different trajectories of life and death.

Notes

- 1 Michel de Montaigne, "On Friendship," in *On Friendship*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2005), 10.
- 2 This quote and subsequent ones are translated from Aboriginal English.
- 3 Candace Vogler, "Sex and Talk," *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (1998): 328–65; Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 4 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
- 5 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 6 The comparison of Islam with communism reflects the views of the Rand Corporation and other conservative think tanks. See, for instance, the Rand symposium "Diagnosing Al Qaeda," available online at www.rand.org/publications/eb/def/0903/front.html (accessed January 15, 2007). For Bush's speech, see www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html (accessed January 15, 2007).
- 7 Margaret Somerville, "The Case against 'Same-Sex Marriage': A Brief Submitted to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, April 29, 2003," available online at www.catholiceducation.org/articles/homosexuality/h00063.html (accessed January 15, 2007).
- 8 Biddy Martin, "Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary," *differences* 6.2–3 (1994): 100–125.
- 9 Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
- 10 Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).
- 11 We were witnessing, I thought, an example of what Judith Butler described as the disciplinary function of the "proper object" ("Against Proper Objects, Introduction," *differences* 6.2–3 [1994]: 1–26).