

Keynote at the Living and Loving in Diversity 2018. Tina and Renee Dixon

Thank you so much for this opportunity to speak in front of you today. We would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today. We pay our respect to their elders past, present and emerging. We commit to walk lightly on their lands, leaving only footmarks.

I remember arriving to the Central station in Sydney around midnight. Coming from a small town, I did not have any prior expectations of how Sydney would look like. But when in the city of millions, the only leaving creature on the train station platform was a seagull, an overwhelming sense of loneliness started to creep in. I don't remember much of our first years in here, but I do distinctively remember two feelings. One is that there was no more community to belong to. And two, your accent did not mean that you could speak multiple languages, but rather that people, white people, could exercise their power on you.

Today we want to share some thoughts on the experience of queer asylum. We will start by setting a scene reflecting on a mainstream refugee discourse, then move to add sexuality, and gender to the mix. We will talk about some of the experiences of being a queer and from a refugee background and finally give you some take-aways.

In the museum space there is a concept of an authorised heritage discourse which means that only particular objects are treated as having a value. For instance, an old cathedral – tangible, Western, so yes valuable; an Aboriginal dance – intangible, not Western so, not sure. Very colonial as you can see.

With the impact of colonisation in Australia on the one hand, and reflecting on the narratives we hear about refugees, I argue that there is a concept of an authorised refugee discourse.

There is this figure of a faceless refugee, who gets to be labelled often by the very advocates as highly traumatised thus vulnerable and with no agency. This figure is the other whether it is framed through racist narratives of invaders, or even well-meaning phrases such as “refugees are people just like us”. The importance of this figure is often justified through the demand to hear their story. This figure appears to have no gender or sexuality, which in reality means being cis, male and heterosexual.

This figure also exists in the world where white privilege is normalised and to be multicultural means to be compared against Anglo. As Patricia Williams drawing on Franz

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Fannon argues that in this “color-blind-obsessed world of while guilt it is not polite to make white people aware of race”.

Such a nature of the general refugee discourse also implicates on the narratives about queer refugees. Queer refugees occupy a marginal space. Sometimes it is so because of the incomprehensible nature of their experiences, at other times, due to reduction of people to labels.

Queer refugees are excluded from mainstream refugee and/or their ethnic communities because of potential homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. The only way to belong there is to hide who you are. How is this different from where you came from then?

For the rest of the society and often LGBTIQ communities themselves queer refugees are exotic. Sometimes, there are paraded as ones in the utter need of protection because they come from oppressive regimes. We do not dispute that. However, in these instances a juxtaposition against other / heterosexual refugees takes place. A narrative of people seeking asylum that do not and cannot abide by our progressive values is perpetuated. This is a slippery slope to racism, xenophobia and islamophobia.

Often any narratives about queer refugees are explicitly gender-blind and inherently male-centric. For example, those already rear narratives about queer refugees often present you with a male account of queer asylum. Of course, some may argue that statistically there may be more men seeking asylum than women. But let’s look deeper in there.

One cannot deny the way patriarchy works making women and moreover queer women invisible. Women still have restriction on their freedom of movement. Consider for example, how can a queer woman leave Saudi Arabia where she must be accompanied by a male guardian at almost all times. Women are also denied of their sexuality. In some cases, sexuality is equated to simply sex. One of the women in my research said that when her parents found out that she was having relationships with a woman, they arranged a marriage for her. In their mind, she wanted to have sex, and the only acceptable sex was with a husband. Where queer women’s relationships are not criminalised by laws as those of gay man, this does not mean that their life is easier but rather shows the work of the heterosexual state machinery that does not imagine that women can love women and cohabitate together. Such an invisibility at the legislative and societal levels in countries

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I am not making this point to compare male and female experiences of queer asylum to conclude for whom it is harder. Rather it is about having an intersectional feminist lens that unpacks how patriarchy and colonisation works rendering different subjects invisible and non-liveable.

Now we'd like to turn to the life in Australia.

It all starts with an imposition of a 'refugee' label. This imposition works as an epistemic violence erasing not only the very possibility for queer refugee women to exist but influencing their future. Franz Fanon describes this as "arriving into a world of meaning that pre-exists us". This reductionist labelling also constitutes a kind of injury. Butler writes:

To be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are. [...] To be addressed injuriously is not only to be open to an unknown future, but not to know the time and place of injury, and to suffer the disorientation of one's situation {Butler, 1997 #253@4}.

Thinking back to the authorised refugee discourse, to be a labelled as a refugee (in the social not the legal way) is to be made redundant to the other, the one without the agency, to be denied of the past and be assigned a future – a future of a grateful refugee, or a very liberated one because one is queer and so on. Suddenly, this label defines your capacity and assigns you an amount of space you are allowed to occupy. Unless we resist those simplistic overgeneralisations, unless we are represented and represent ourselves those meanings will not be redefined. And while it is true that we may come into social existence through being called and named, ultimately it is in our hands to redefine those meanings.

In this sense representation matters but when it is done on our terms. After all it is two of us presenting today. But this brings us to the second point of living in Australia as a person from a refugee background which is the imperative of storytelling.

The public discourse on refugees in Australia is centred around storytelling, that in its turn is grounded in the recollection of past abuse and violence that had led to the experience of seeking asylum. There are several conditions to that storytelling. Firstly, it is imperative to provide a detailed account of endured traumas. I am going to be sarcastic

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Keynote at the Living and Loving in Diversity 2018. Tina and Renee Dixon now, forget about how trauma operates in the body and psychic. You must remember and retell every detail. Secondly, it must not expose or threaten the privilege of the white nation, but affirm its generosity, hospitality and display eternal gratitude.

Lastly, in the context of queer refugees, storytelling needs to reaffirm colonial binary that a country of origin is backwards, and the hosting country is civilised. This is not to say that human rights violations are acceptable, but rather that the very narrative of one superiority and the constant need for gratification and affirmation of that superiority is problematic and pursues colonial logic. It is the same colonialism that led to de-queering of states and now deems them uncivilised. It is the same colonialism that reallocated homophobia onto brown bodies. It is the same colonialism that moved on from saving middle eastern women to saving middle eastern gays never really caring for either. It is the same colonialism that poses 'where are you from question' not out of curiosity but the drive to classify you, obtain an explanation of why you are in this location, reinforce their superiority and remind you that the feeling of belonging is a fragile thing. It vanishes with just one question.

Stories are important as they give witness. But no one is entitled to my story unless I choose to tell it, no one is entitled to define how I will tell it. Stories should not be only limited to the past. Of course, there is an epistemological value in the past experiences that at the end led us to safety, but it is erroneous to claim that those experiences come to completion at the moment of border crossing or visa grant. Our stories do not finish there. Our experiences become more multilayered and implicated by gender, sexuality, race and many other identities.

There are also other expectations from you when you are a refugee. They are imposed by the privilege of white nation, heteronormativity and coloniality. You need to be grateful, polite, assimilate well, don't be too wilful (to draw on Sara Ahmed) especially for women and so on. For queer refugees there is an additional set of expectations arising from their sexuality.

There is an expectation to disclose your sexuality, because 'it is so good for you to be gay in Australia', they say, because 'you must feel so free now', they insist. This expectation to come out is imposed on you when your very survival depended on being discreet before.

There is an expectation to fit into the Western categorisation of being LGBT. At one of the groups for LGBTIQ people seeking asylum, a moderator places 6 big letters on the floor

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'L, G, B, T, I, Q'. 'Please select one', he says. 'One that describes you'. 'I select B because I am a boxer'.

There is an expectation that you will settle for any help because you must be grateful, but also that you need the same as any other, because all refugees and by that matter all queer refugees are the same.

There is an expectation that in particular spaces you will actually hide your sexuality not to make others uncomfortable or because your sexuality when it is not heterosexual gets treated as a personal matter. The latter influences our data collection practices or rather a lack of good data on the LGBTIQ communities.

Sexuality is still a rare topic within refugee spaces, same as race and/or refugee status in the mainstream LGBTIQ activism. Preparing to present before you today, I question what is the role of spaces like this? I realised it is an answer that I still do not have. Early on in Australia we were selecting a suburb to live looking at its ethnic composition. If people from our country lived there, it was a no go place. There was a research done saying that people who migrate to a new country, in their national mentality get stuck in the year of departure. We could not risk to again experience the same homophobia. And while maybe we were overgeneralising, but there were people who were correcting 'wife to a husband' when you were telling who you came with, or worse, changing the seat in the class to the desk at the back, not to seat with you, as if you were contagious.

A thought that migrant communities could be queer were not putting your mind at piece. Survival guilt is a funny thing. It is hard to overcome it. It is hard to cross that line and be part of the community again. It requires time and healing.

Running Queer Sisterhood, a peer-run support and advocacy group for queer refugee women showed us the power of peer run spaces. When I met other women, who shared similar experiences with us across language barriers and cultural differences, it felt familiar and warm. It felt like belonging again. Some much could stay unspoken because so much was understood and shared. Yet none of us are same. Even in a group small like that there is diversity of experiences, identities, circumstances.

One-size-fits-all never fits anyone perfectly. Inclusivity is not achieved by simply putting a rainbow sticker on your door. Sharing some aspects of your identity with me does not make you qualified to decide on my behalf. Reinforcing single narratives about refugees and denying their multiplicity negates the very point of the refugee activism.

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To genuinely respond to diversity, requires adopting an intersectional lens recognising how power and discrimination intersect and how different groups of people experience them differently. It means understanding that gender identity, race, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, age, disability, refugee status, class and others do not exist in isolation from each other but rather are intertwined and influence how we experience the social world and how it perceives us. Taking an intersectional lens means recognising that there is no one way to be a queer or a refugee. It requires us to identify and dismantle systemic discrimination, reflect on “our own relationships to power and privilege as bystanders, researchers, workers or advocates”, and most importantly it requires us to centre marginalised voices.