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Trapped in the gap

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All my life gaps have drawn me in.

The gap between my privileged, middle-class upbringing and the oppressed people of the world drove me to write Amnesty letters on flimsy blue air mail paper in high school and sent me into activist groups as a medical student at the University of Melbourne in the early 1990s. In 1996 at the Canberra protests against the Howard government's first budget, it dawned on me that, as an Australian, the gap of Aboriginal disadvantage was the one that should trouble me most.

Along with some smart, politically aware friends, I helped to start an Indigenous solidarity group back on campus, working with Kooris to raise awareness of Indigenous issues and address White racism. As soon as I finished my combined medicine and arts degree, at the age of 25, I drove a second-hand Toyota 4 across the country to begin a new life as an intern at the Royal Darwin Hospital.

It was not long after starting work in the hospital that I became interested in the Indigenous health research institute close by, the (pseudonymous) Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health.¹ In my personal journey of methodically applying myself to what I thought to be the most urgent gap in the most effective way, the Darwin Institute

¹ Parts of the following few paragraphs draw on the Preface to Kowal (2015).

seemed the next logical step. Having trained as a doctor, Indigenous health was the most important area to work in; within Indigenous health, public health was the most effective way to improve health; and to ensure that public health methods worked as well as they could, we needed good public health research. I knew the legacy of exploitative, disempowering research practices, and I believed the only way to close the gap was for researchers to truly commit to Indigenous control, a belief that seemed to align with the goals of the institute. I began infiltrating the institute, introducing myself to people after lunchtime meetings, having coffee with researchers after ward rounds, even studying Yolngu Matha at the Northern Territory University in anticipation of remote community work. I had soon lined up my first job at the institute as a public health researcher.

I spent a few years engaged in intermittent remote community work, combined with long stretches in front of a computer in town, translating the work into quantifiable outcomes, academic publications and community reports. I was finally working to close gaps through culturally appropriate, community-led health interventions.

Having reached the pinnacle of my own instrumentalism, the place where the rhetoric and level of resources meant there was the most potential to close the gap, I found myself disillusioned. My enthusiasm was dissipated at the power plays that went on between staff that overshadowed the cooperation that was needed; at the way that some projects which were widely promoted by the institute and governments as 'the answer' seemed full of dysfunction on the inside; and at the ease with which staff would criticise other projects as disempowering or even racist, but would not offer any useful assistance. Above all, I came to question the arguments circulating within the institute explaining why research had not worked in the past and why Indigenous control would fix the problem. The tendency to demonise White researchers in particular seemed an inadequate way to explain the situation, once I had got to know many of them and of course become one myself.

I became sensitive to the prominent role played by the moral politics of race and identity in public and private exchanges at the institute. In a seminar, for example, a question from an audience member about the method of payment of Indigenous research staff could imply that the White researcher was not paying their Indigenous staff sufficiently and was therefore exploitative or racist. A detailed explanation and

justification would always follow such a question to deflect the implication, whether or not the implication was intended. Where projects were presented to the public, White researchers would take great pains to present an 'Indigenous face', editing themselves out of videos, preparing presentations for Indigenous colleagues to deliver but remaining silent themselves, and perhaps exaggerating the role of community members in a project. Whites were reluctant to question anything an Indigenous person said, even if it was clearly wrong. My interest in the source and effects of these racialised behaviours intensified, and the institute became the ethnographic field site for my PhD research. As I cynically wrote in my journal in the first months of my research: 'In the political world of Indigenous health we don't have arguments, we have positions. And the position of the "authentic Aboriginal voice" trumps even the most eloquent argument, and has no need for it.'

Over the course of my research, I recognised that much effort expended in the name of closing the gap was channelled into creating and maintaining racialised identities. In an *Indigenous* health institute, those who walk through the front doors every day are not just *people*, they are Indigenous people or non-Indigenous people. The institute is an always already racialised space. When the racial identities circulating in people's minds are examined more closely, they immediately multiply: the Indigenous people could be 'community people', or 'urban people'; the non-Indigenous people could be 'White people' or both non-White and non-Indigenous; the Whites could be 'rednecks' or 'anti-racists'; those not yet known to the viewer would best be classified as 'possibly Indigenous' until their Indigenous status has subtly been ascertained. Much work went into maintaining one's racial identity. For non-Indigenous people, this meant maintaining a specific racial identity as a 'good' White person and not an ignorant, exploitative, 'racist' White person: part of the solution and not part of the problem.

Having recognised the intense identity work that consumes so much energy in Indigenous affairs, I tried to understand what drove it. My explanation forms the heart of my book, *Trapped in the gap: doing good in Indigenous Australia* (Kowal 2015).

The racialised performances that characterise efforts to close the gap are far more than the ‘moral vanity’ Noel Pearson once diagnosed in the ‘liberal left’ (Pearson 2007); they are driven by the politics of the gap that continues to trap many of us.

Those who seek to close the gap experience two equal and opposing fears. First, they understand that improving Indigenous health requires systemic change, and they question their ability to overcome the institutional racism of post-settler society. While ‘the gap’ remains as an organic barometer of continued colonial oppression, they fear they are doing too little. At the same time, they fear they are doing too much. Encounters with radically different Indigenous ways of life leave White anti-racists concerned that their efforts to improve the health and social status of Indigenous people might be furthering the neo-colonial expansion of biopolitical norms. If the gap is due to the ways of life requisite to cultural survival, it follows that erasing the gap erodes Indigenous cultural distinctiveness. Despite the postcolonial mantra of community control, White anti-racists worry that their labours will be judged as indistinguishable from those of racist bureaucrats and missionaries of the past.

In the book I explain these fears as the product of tension between the two poles of equality and difference. White anti-racists manage the tension between attaining statistical equality (explored as ‘remedialism’) and maintaining essential Indigenous difference (explored as ‘orientalism’) by constructing a particular mode of Indigenous difference I call ‘remediable difference’. Remediable difference is a difference that can be improved. This construction of difference works to manage the tension between ‘remedialism’ and ‘orientalism’ by promising that Indigenous people are different from non-Indigenous people, but not *so* different that interventions to close the gap will be ineffective, or will make them less Indigenous. In the book I recount how remediable difference was commonly unravelled by contact between White anti-racists and *radically* different Indigenous people, threatening the perceived moral integrity of both parties. The intense identity work I observed were attempts to manage or prevent this unravelling, and preserve the possibility of ethical White anti-racist intervention on deserving, authentic Indigenous subjects.

Illustrations of these arguments and their implications can be found in the book. But in this brief piece I want to sketch out how Jon’s work has been crucial to my understanding of the gap and its traps.

In a sense, my work has sought to illustrate the affective and psychic costs to White anti-racists who inhabit the gap's contradictions on a daily basis.

For me, it was his 2007 Topical Issue paper, written as a rapid response to Howard's Northern Territory Intervention, that most succinctly expressed the dilemma of *all* attempts to address Indigenous disadvantage:

Does the externally defined aim of normalization accord with Indigenous aspirations across the 73 prescribed communities, or put another way, do non-mainstream, culturally-different Australians want to be like 'the rest of us'? ... The big picture is that equality of socio-economic status will not occur if people continue to live on their land in remote Australia, if they retain distinct cultural practices and priorities and if they resist or do not desire to move up the settlement hierarchy to towns and cities (Altman 2007: 9–10).

This is what haunts White anti-racists and threatens to unravel remediable difference. The possibility of radical difference makes closing the gap both impossible and immoral. As I put it in the book,

If Indigenous people really have radically different priorities, then the project of improving their health, of making the lines on the graph converge, becomes a burden imposed upon them. As one colleague mused about a project he was involved in, 'The thing that bothers me is if it hasn't been taken up well and the community don't own it, well do they really want it?' There is a dual threat contained here: the fear that Indigenous people are not the innocent moral victims of structural causes but are actively determining their own radically different fates, and the fear that White anti-racist efforts to help them are merely the most recent colonial imposition (Kowal 2015: 48).

Jon has repeatedly and eloquently described the traps of the gap. What my work adds is an understanding of the high moral stakes involved in recognising or ignoring those traps. White anti-racists, many Indigenous people and the liberal state in general, have much invested in the logic of closing gaps, perhaps explaining why it has been so hard to take any alternative seriously.

In my first email correspondence with Jon in 2008 I naively asked him if his view in that 2007 paper was new, or at least expressed in a new way. He promptly provided a list of other places where he had

previously made similar arguments. And more recently he sent me back to his very first book published in 1979 where he already flags the assumptions of economic equality.

In discussing the possibility of effecting economic improvements in Aboriginal living conditions, it is not presumed that all people concerned would necessarily opt for economic changes, however beneficial materially, if the price for these was to be high in terms of social dismemberment or ecological disfiguration (Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979: 175).

He made this point again in the very first Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) publications. Discussion Paper No. 1 by Jon and Will Sanders, published in 1991, says that remote-living Aboriginal people seek 'to maintain important cultural and economic components of their traditional lifestyles, and consequently reject total economic assimilation' (Altman & Sanders 1991: 16–7).

The same year CAEPR's 2nd Research Monograph was published, analysing the form and progress of the 1987 Aboriginal Employment Development Strategy. In Jon's conclusion he explicitly argues that better definitions of 'equity' beyond statistical equality need to be developed that take into account 'cultural issues', recognising that 'many Aboriginal people in rural and remote locations ... do not seek full incorporation into mainstream labour markets' (Altman 1991: 161).

In 2005 Altman and Rowse made the tension between difference and equality clear in an important chapter:

to change people's forms of economic activity is to change people culturally. Some anthropological studies of regional economic activity argue that certain economic adaptations made by Indigenous Australians embody complex trade-offs between peoples' desires for cultural continuity and for material prosperity (Altman & Rowse 2005: 176).

Jon's critique of closing the gap is perhaps most forcefully expressed in his 2009 Working Paper:

Cultural plurality suggests that there might be multiple interpretations of life worlds—where the state might see failure, mendicancy, dysfunctionality, and poor outcomes measured by social indicators, many Aboriginal people identify certain features that lie at the heart of their worldview (Altman 2009: 13).

The traps of the gap have perhaps never been more clearly expressed.

But despite his annihilating critiques of the gap, I think Jon understands its attraction. In an email to me he admitted that he too was once drawn into the gap:

I started my career 'shocked' by the gap in 1976 in the economics department of Unimelb and now I see talk of the gap as unhelpful and demeaning, good for gauging input requirements not for measuring outcomes (pers. comm., 23 January 2014).

Jon now prefers points to gaps, balancing hybrid economies to find the 'bliss point' (Altman 2010), where the market, state and customary economies happily meet.

It involves allowing 'the option for voluntary exclusion [from the mainstream economy and society] as a strategic choice' (Altman 2009: 14). Such voluntary exclusion would be no picnic and 'will never statistically close the gap' (Altman 2009: 11), but would succeed in valuing diversity.

I would need another paper to explore what the White anti-racists I studied might make of the bliss point of Indigenous development, if they were able to find it. I suspect, however, that they would continue to be troubled by the problem of distinguishing between the choice of difference and the trap of disadvantage. While Jon has worried all his career that attempts to close the gap ignore the choice to be different, some anti-racists would be equally concerned that perpetuating difference undermines the capacity to access mainstream education and employment opportunities, and that White desires to uphold difference are more to do with 'the choices of the West dropped into an Indigenous cultural substrate', as Murray Garde put it.²

We see this debate played out in relation to customary environmental management: de Rijke et al. (this volume) question whether environmental management is 'customary' if it involves helicopters and weed killers and is no different to the work a non-Indigenous environmental manager would do. What draws my attention is not

2 Murray Garde quoted from the conference presentation: Cooke P, Garde M, Guymala T and Yibarbuk D (2014). *Contemporary customary economy, attribution of value and the management of Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area*, presented at Engaging Indigenous Economy: Debating Diverse Approaches Conference, The Australian National University, Canberra, 4 September.

whether the work of Caring for Country programs is sufficiently different to earn the 'customary' descriptor, but why the question is so crucial. Depending on the answer, customary land management is either a bliss point or a Trojan horse for neoliberal environmentalism (Agrawal 2005).

Jokes aside, the debates that Jon has so passionately contributed to for nearly 40 years are deadly serious. My insight in 1996 that the struggle for Indigenous social justice is the primary struggle of this country still drives my work, and it is a challenge but also a pleasure to work in a field where the stakes are so high and the issues so important. In this field where passionate debate sometimes spills into acrimony, the generosity Jon brings to academia is highly appreciated. I will finish with an anecdote that illustrates this generosity. He took it very well when, in a prominent 2008 article, I essentially used him as a straw man to stand in for a purely 'orientalist' approach that rejected remedialism (Kowal 2008). In retrospect it would have been more accurate to say he advocated for some 'pendulum swinging' back towards orientalism and away from the extreme remedialism of neoliberal intervention (Altman 2009). Rather than being annoyed that I called him an orientalist, he joked that he is actually an oriental, having been born in Haifa. He has been wonderfully supportive of my work, most recently bestowing on me the gift of a book title: *Trapped in the gap*. We are all still trapped in the gap—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people most of all, but also those who try to close gaps, and those like us who pick apart logics and effects of intervention. I am glad Jon is trapped there with us.

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