

## BOOK REVIEW

Kowal, Emma. 2015. *Trapped in the Gap: Doing Good in Indigenous Australia*. New York, Berghahn, ISBN: 978-1-78238-599-8.

Land, Clare. 2015. *Decolonizing Solidarity: Dilemmas and Directions for Supporters of Indigenous Struggles*. London, Zed Books. ISBN: 978-1-78360-172-1.

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**White allies in need of rescue: a review essay of *Trapped in the Gap* and *Decolonizing Solidarity*.**

'If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time; but if you are here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.' – Lilla Watson

Both Land and Kowal's latest books concern the under-researched topic of white allies working with Aboriginal people: white allies who seek to avoid harm and receive absolution from their white privilege. Both are based on doctoral theses. Both have among their central concerns the racialised identities of zones within the settler society called Australia, and can be characterised as seeking to recognise and activate Indigenous sovereignty. Each work relies on respectful and careful ethnographic observation and interview analysis, and acknowledge the author's own personal positionality within those white allies under study. They both refer to the well-known trope of (self)critique in Indigenous affairs: 'mercenaries, missionaries and misfits' (Kowal, 2015: 141-147; Land, 2015: 2). Both inquiries were prompted in part by Koori activist and historian Gary Foley's injunction for white supporters to work within their own mob, rather than worry about or try to help Aboriginal people, unless explicitly asked to do so (Kowal, 2015: 24; Land, 2015: 175, 206). Both benefit from the openness and trust showed by their interviewees. Finally, both seek to transcend the binary of Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjectivities in pursuit of a more socially just and inclusive Australia.

### **Trapped in the Gap**

Kowal's site is the avowedly 'progressive' Institute of Indigenous Health in Darwin. This centre conducts research and supports interventionist public health programs in Aboriginal communities that have some of the worst health statistics in the country. Staff are mostly non-Aboriginal, many from outside the Northern Territory, and are committed to ethical partnerships, community control by Aboriginal people, and crucially, to avoiding previous patterns of assimilation or abuse.

While many Australians may be aware of disadvantages facing Indigenous people, most remain oblivious to the entrenched nature of white privilege, and when confronted with it, adopt strategies of minimisation or denial (Dunn and Nelson, 2011). Meanwhile, institute employees are called upon to acknowledge their racial identities and privileges on a daily basis, and frequently try to erase themselves or to publicly defer to Aboriginal voices (2015: xiii, 47-48, 132). Those Aboriginal people who normally interact with such 'post-colonial' staff become adept at deploying their power to condemn or shame. Kowal's main interest is the interplay between these racialised identities, and the extent to which their entanglement works to thwart good intentions.

A key tension for white anti-racists is between remedialism (reducing the gap between Indigenous health and wellbeing and that of other Australians) and positive Orientalism (valorisation of cultural difference). Elsewhere Kowal (2008: 343) has explained that, 'At the simplest level, remedialism aims to change Indigenous people to reduce inequality (i.e. to make them healthier) whereas Orientalism requires them to remain different.' Kowal (2015: 50) usefully suggests that for many non-Indigenous people, Indigenous difference is split into two parts: sanitised alterity (songs, stories, art, living as part of the environment) and un-sanitised alterity (violence, drinking, poor diet and health, and now sexual abuse of children). Efforts are made to correct the behaviours of un-sanitised alterity or their impacts, while sanitised alterity remains intact 'to ensure that these newly healthy subjects are recognisably Indigenous' (2008: 345). This is crucial to reassure the interveners that they are quite unlike earlier interventionists, who took away children and bullied Aboriginal people to change 'for their own good.'

In one of her key theoretical arguments, Kowal criticises those like me who focus on structural causes (often now termed social determinants) of Aboriginal ill health and downplay agential explanations (2015: 43). She records frantic efforts to avoid citing Aboriginal choices and behaviours as leading to disease, achieved by a refusal (despite specific request) to countenance 'politically incorrect' factors (2015: 43-45). Overstructuration, according to Kowal, works by directing efforts to remediable difference (poor housing, poverty, lack of access to services). Remediable difference offers white anti-racists a space to help Aboriginal people without harming them (2015: 48-49). While the appeal of this reassuring strategy is clear, this reviewer would argue that all white anti-racists will need to accept the inherent contradictions involved and own the harms they do even when actually 'helping'.

Kowal's accounts of the interactive performances, seeking and claiming recognition by both white anti-racists and Aboriginal interlocutors, are some of the

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most striking aspects of the book. She reveals how individual white staff compete in their public vigilance towards any racist or colonial assumption, even if doing so compromises project outcomes. Kowal also identifies how white staff seek the 'authentic Indigenous voice' to protect them from anxiety, and how the Aboriginal people who provide it authenticate their views by strategies of opacity (2015: 117-119). As she notes, 'When an Indigenous person does speak, they are rarely questioned or challenged, and their comments are generally followed by a respectful silence' (2015: 119). Others have noted the anxiousness of non-Indigenous workers to avoid appearing racist (Bennett, Zubrzycki and Bacon, 2011). Kowal puts this anxiety within the context of international literature on recognition that has mostly focused on minority peoples. This allows new insights into the constraints and limitations for both Aboriginal and white people negotiating mutual recognition, whereby, 'On both sides, these spaces are prisons and vehicles of change: spaces of confinement and potential mobility' (2015: 129).

Managing the stigma of privilege is a major challenge for white anti-racists, especially when directly confronting the harsh conditions in remote communities. As noted, one strategy is self-effacement, whereby white anti-racists minimise their roles and anticipate their demise. Another is to revel in suffering, 'whether the suffering relates to physical hardship, professional frustration, or suspicion and betrayal from Indigenous colleagues' (2015: 150). Such suffering temporarily relieves the white anti-racist of the stigma of privilege, 'For if we are suffering, we take solace from the belief that we cannot be simultaneously causing harm' (2015: 151). Kowal calls for an alternative politics seeking 'non-stigmatised, non-settler identities' (2015: 169) that don't ignore history or privilege but 'decouples Indigeneity from disadvantage ... and from callow moral dichotomies' (Paradies, 2006: 363). This move away from essentialist understandings of race and privilege is welcomed in both teaching and practising anti-racism, signalling a confidence often missing from non-Aboriginal allies in Australian debates.

### **Decolonising Solidarity**

Covering similar terrain, Land explores the interpersonal context of white (would be) supporters of Aboriginal struggles, primarily in Melbourne but with national implications. The key question is how to decolonise solidarity. Most of the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous activists she interviews stress the absolute importance of waiting to be asked before offering help (2015: 128). This injunction is often twinned with the demand that supporters educate themselves, and then educate other non-Indigenous people to relieve Aboriginal people of this burden (2015: 82, 175). In line with Lilla Watson's famous quote, allies are expected to be change agents, not helpers, to be 'absolutely clear that you are doing this because it is in your interest or for the greater good' (2015:206). Land (2015: 164) cites Gary Foley:

The first thing you need to do is not go and talk to any blackfellas at all, really. You need to look in the mirror. ... You need to think hard and fast about who you are.

Critically, this self-reflection must be linked to public political work that is long-term and sustainable. Working in and on the local level is also seen as crucial, given the common focus on remote areas in Indigenous affairs (2015: 182). Land recognises that allies benefit from being seen as 'good whites', but is told that such kudos should be used to convince others to support Indigenous struggles (2015: 244-245).

In contrast to the more analytical style of Kowal, Land provides hundreds of direct statements from her informants, thereby reinforcing diversity within both Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups. These voices also offer wonderful insights into intercultural misapprehension and connections, as when to her intense dismay, the dog that the Melbourne activist asked a Yankunytjatjara elder to name was declared Lassie (2015: 181).

While exotic nomenclature is a minor appropriation, Land's informants describe the constant questions and demands made by often well-intentioned whites, and forbearance towards ignorance and offence required by Indigenous people who seek dialogue and collaboration (2015: 123). Such forbearance is not always forthcoming, and allies should expect to be abused and regarded as racist, in part because they are validated by such treatment (2015: 132-133). This tension reflects intergenerational conflicts and reminds us that the state is not just outside of and imposed on its critics but lives within them (2015: 132). This realisation challenges Kowal's call for a 'non-settlers' identity. Land envisions a rich mosaic of Aboriginal leaders and long-term and well-regarded non-Aboriginal allies, and offers hope for genuine comradeship.

### **Saving the Saviours**

These two studies contribute to the small literature on white anti-racist supporters in Indigenous Australian contexts. The parallels between the academic and political spheres are striking, as are many of the lessons learned. Land repeatedly evidences Aboriginal experiences of and preferences for ways of working with Indigenous people that are respectful, self-aware and trustworthy. Kowal offers a penetrating and often discomfiting analysis that mirrors many other settings in the academy, government, and non-government agencies. She suggests that we can escape the defeatism and contradictions typically found amongst those who work to empower Aboriginal people and make themselves redundant. Reading the two together offers non-Aboriginal Australians solid material to work through, preferably together with other allies, so that

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the burden of educating whites and enduring their well-intentioned slights and irritations may diminish over time for Aboriginal colleagues.

**References**

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