

Dino Hodge (ed.), *Colouring the Rainbow: Blak Queer and Trans Perspectives: Life Stories and Essays by the First Nations People of Australia* (Wakefield Press, 2015)

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of queer and trans narratives, perspectives and scholarship, and *Colouring the Rainbow: Blak Queer and Trans Perspectives* (2015) can be seen as a valuable contribution to this emerging body of work. This collection of life stories and essays by First Nations People of Australia is edited by Dino Hodge. At its core, he explains, are issues of ‘indigeneity and colonialism with regard to gender and sexuality’ (vii). The collection brings together multiple and varied perspectives, which have been divided into three sections. The first is a series of life stories, the second a series of essays and the third consists of academic essays. Thus, it is both an archive of lives whose diversity has been erased from ‘official’ Australian history, and a critique of the discourses that perpetuate this erasure.

In the opening lines of his introduction to the collection, Troy-Anthony Baylis explains that it ‘is as if history has constructed Aboriginality as being so pure and so savage ... that if tainted by the complexity of sexuality and gender, mixed ethnographies, mixed geographies and mixed appearances, the whole look would be ruined’ (1). *Colouring the Rainbow* goes a long way to exposing this denied complexity. Not only does it lay the narratives of activists alongside the essays of academics, and not only does it contain the stories of those whose genders and sexualities refute the colonial claim of heterosexual indigeneity, but the issue of Aboriginal ‘authenticity’ is raised by a number of the contributors. Together, these contributors shatter the idea of Aboriginal ‘purity’ with the representation of the rich, difficult complexities of their lived experiences.

Part One of the collection, ‘Inner Reflections – Life Stories’, contains fascinating narratives by a range of indigenous people, with sexual identifications ranging from sistergirl (trans is the more mainstream term), gay and MSM (men who have sex with men). While each story is unique, all of them describe the contributor’s struggle to come to terms with their sexuality and/or gender and their indigeneity and how they might reconcile the two. Read together, these stories not only emphasise the shared struggle of being queer/trans and Aboriginal, but also reveal the differences in individual experiences. For example, while Brie Ngala Curtis notes that most of the discrimination she experiences comes from Indigenous men, Laniyuk Garcon-Mills has experienced greater acceptance from her Aboriginal family. Most of the narratives, however, emphasise the importance of culture and staying close to family and country. The exception is the story by R.J. Sailor, which details how he is excluded from both non-Indigenous and traditionalist groups, as well as from a Euro-centric GBLTIQ community. While the rest of the contributors find acceptance and strength in Indigenous and queer communities, finding ways to be both/and, Sailor asserts that he is loyal only to his individual identity (75). However, his narrative still resonates with the other contributions, in that it reflects the vulnerability of being queer/trans and Aboriginal in Australia, as manifested in high school bullying, high suicide rates and the high probability of dying in prison.

The first two essays of Part Two: ‘An Emergent Public Face’, address HIV/AIDs and its impact. The third is a collection of reflections by performers in *OutBlak Adventures*, a ‘performance project exploring personal, funny and moving stories of coming out and what’s it like to be different in and out of family’ (152). The final two essays in this section deal with public pronouncements denigrating queer Aboriginal people. Dr Mark McMillan unpacks the effects and implications of an Australian journalist writing an article about him, questioning his

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blackness and implying that his ‘dubious’ indigeneity coupled with his gayness should have precluded him from winning the Fulbright Scholarship. In the final essay, Steven Lindsay Ross, responds to a ‘homophobic rant’ (182) by boxer Anthony Mundine claiming that indigenous culture precludes queer sexuality.

Part Three, ‘Looking Out of the Mirror – Essays’, contains four academic essays. Respectively, these cover the dual imperatives of decolonising the queer and queering the decolonial, interrogate what individual stories can say about a broader community, critique the three-tier identification system, and consider the role of history-making might play in legitimating a queer/trans indigenous identity. Positioned at the end of the collection, these essays provide a theorisation of many of the issues raised more personally and subjectively in the preceding contributions. Thus, the academic perspective is not the reader’s introduction to the concerns at hand. This, and the academics’ inclusion of their own personal experiences in their essays, serves to foreground the fact that their theorisations are of discourses that have a very real impact.

Focusing on the intersection between race and queer and trans subjectivities within a country with a colonial history, this collection resonates with work coming out of various African countries, such as *African Sexualities*, edited by Sylvia Tamale. In some ways, the weaknesses of *Colouring the Rainbow* are also its strengths. The inclusion of non-academic contributors, whose writing skills are not necessarily polished, means that some details of certain of the narratives can be hard to follow and that a clear line of argument can be difficult to establish. The collection of a diverse array of narratives from very different contributors means that, although themes do reoccur within the collection, it is a somewhat choppy read. Part Two, in particular, does not quite cohere as a grouping. However, it is the very inclusion of this multitude of very different contributors that makes the collection so valuable. The ways in which the collection challenges the neat confines of its packaging reflects the impossibility of ascribing any single narrative to the complex subjectivities that emerge at the intersection of queer/trans and Aboriginal, belying the conceptualisation of the Aboriginal as ‘purely savage’. It seems to me that the line recurring throughout Sandy O’Sullivan’s essay – ‘This is the experience of an Aboriginal lesbian. And it is not.’ (222) – could serve as a refrain for the entire collection. By bringing together individual stories, the collection both tells the story of a broader community, and reminds the reader that individual lived experiences can never quite be contained within social categories such as ‘queer’, ‘trans’ or ‘Aboriginal’.

Jenny Bożena du Preez

Rhodes University