Benevolent Othering: Displaying and ‘Celebrating’ Diversity

by

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The great post-colonial thinker Edward Said, draws a distinction between two types of knowledge of Other people, arguing that:

there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge - if that is what it is - that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency and outright war. (Said, 1978 (2003, 1995):xiv)

I propose a third possibility: benevolent Othering. By this I mean knowledge – if that is what it is – that is not ‘belligerent’ or even hostile towards the Other. It overtly exhibits goodwill towards Other people and can be the result of compassion and even careful study. However, I suggest that benevolent Othering should be understood – like hostile Othering – as reductive and self-affirming, in contrast with careful understanding and engagement with the Other.

Benevolent Othering is a discursive formation¹ evident in many different contexts, but my study is limited to texts displayed in public spaces (understood broadly). Some examples include: advertisements for child sponsorship and fair trade products; political posters, e.g. for an event exploring ‘Homophobia and the ban on gay marriage;’ public education materials informing that ‘Depression and anxiety can affect anyone at any time’ and signs that regulate spaces – e.g. reserving public transport seating for ‘elderly or disabled passengers’ or advising that ‘Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people and their families are welcome at this
service.’ A single text typically serves many of these functions simultaneously, e.g. a charity may educate the public while soliciting money.

Specifically, in this paper I focus on a case study, an exhibition called ‘DS: We are Different but the Same,’ held early in 2008. It was organised by an international student group, the Melbourne University Overseas Student Service (MUOSS), as part of their activities for ‘International Week.’ Their promotional materials described the week as ‘a variety of events to celebrate diversity.’ The exhibition was advertised as part of the University’s ‘Diversity Week,’ which coincided with the State Government’s ‘Celebrate our Cultural Diversity Week’ and the Federal Government’s ‘Harmony Day.’ That is, this exhibition wasn’t an isolated event, it was just one example of variety of events held nationally whose stated aim was to ‘celebrate diversity.’ I argue that such displays can be productively understood as examples of benevolent Othering.

This particular exhibition was coordinated by a group (international students) who lack was has been theorised as ‘white sovereign power.’ Hence, the relationships between those responsible for the display, those displayed and those viewing the exhibition are more ambivalent than in many comparable events (c.f. the Federal Government’s Harmony Day materials). This exhibition is also structurally different to many ‘diversity’ exhibitions, in that it allowed for ‘polyvocality’ (Lidchi, 2007:201) – that is, space was included for viewer responses, which meant that multiple voices contributed to the ‘meaning’ of the exhibition. These voices often challenged the preferred meaning (Hall, 2007:228) that was offered by the
accompanying texts (or implied by the overall context), sometimes offering *repressed readings* in response, or dialogically negotiating meanings.

The exhibition was physically displayed on the ground, in a busy courtyard/thoroughfare. It comprised 43 professional photographs, each mounted on black card with an explanatory text and space for viewers to respond. Interspersed amongst these photographic cards were four brief texts, similarly mounted on black card but with neither images nor space for responses. Three of these criticised international students’ ineligibility for concession fares on public transport in Victoria, while the fourth quoted an Education Minister proclaiming the “value” of international students. These were the only texts making reference to international students, suggesting both connection and separation between international students and the diversity represented – a point I return to later.

**The exhibition’s ‘preferred reading’: the global cultural mosaic**

‘Diversity’ in this exhibition is represented predominantly in terms of national, ethnic or religious identity. Two images foreground ‘sexual diversity’ and one disability, in addition to national location (these three images are discussed further below). As a collection of images and texts, the exhibition arguably offers a ‘preferred reading’: the ‘global cultural mosaic’ model of diversity (Dicks, 2003). That is, ‘diversity’ is
represented through a collection of ‘clearly distinguished, homogenous cultural identities’ (Dicks 2003). In this model, each identity is associated with a specific geographic territory.

This ‘global cultural mosaic’ model is common throughout my corpus, but is radically reductive. As Dicks (2003) argues, it glosses over differences and conflicts within cultural identities as well as failing to problematise power imbalances or structural inequalities. Moreover, I would add that it tends to leave dominant identities invisible. Hage (1994) problematises this relationship between Australian multiculturalism and the Anglo-Celtic ‘sovereign subject.’ He argues that multicultural discourses externalise diversity: the central Anglo-Celtic subject has diversity, rather than being part of it. The organisers of this exhibition, however, are not Hage’s Anglo-Celtic sovereign subject – they are international students. The exhibition does include international students, but only in the four texts that are without images or space for comments. I return to this complexity later in this paper.

Diversity is also externalised more literally, presented as predominantly ‘elsewhere,’ outside Australia. Only five images represent diversity within Australia and all frame diversity as a property of ‘outsiders’ (Hage, 2006). One of the texts celebrates that international students ‘enrich our education system’, another states that ‘we have such a rich culture that is being neglected’ (emphasis added), in reference to Indigenous Australians. Both international students and Indigenous people are represented as external to the national self. Another image shows a meeting between Cardinal Pell and New York City Mosque Imam, Feisal Abdul Rauf. The latter is described as the ‘guest’ of the NSW Premier. Pell is neither named nor discussed in the accompanying
text, which focuses entirely on Rauf. That is, only the outsider/Other needs explanation; diversity is associated with ‘elsewhere’.

**Racism in Benevolent Othering**

Hage (1994) argues that ‘peaceful co-existence’ is an organising principle in Australian multicultural discourse. MUOSS’ promotional materials state that the exhibition aimed to promote ‘racial harmony.’ To their credit (and unlike many comparable events), the organisers decided to engage with issues of racism, rather than repress such conflicts.

However, in this exhibition, racism (like diversity) is overwhelmingly represented as ‘elsewhere.’ Moreover, there is rarely enough context provided for the viewer to gain even a basic understanding of any issues involved. For example, one image shows a black man in Los Angeles protesting ‘the Mexican government’s sale of postage stamps featuring a black comic book figure some civil rights groups consider racist.’ No context is given for the viewer to understand what might be racist about the comic book figure, whether there are differences of opinion, or – if the issue was so straightforward – why the Mexican government would be using this figure on stamps. Hence, the viewer is unable to respond with anything other than a vague, uninformed sympathy for the man, and perhaps by extension for black people more generally –
what I am calling benevolent Othering. More detailed contextual information – preferably drawing out some of the conflicts involved – could allow for more genuine understanding, and perhaps even an empathetic response.

Respondents used the comments section to discuss the nature of racism and racialised conflict. While these comments could not be described as complex or sustained theoretical engagements, there are some insightful interventions. A comment – ‘Say no to racism!’ – elicited a sardonic response – ‘No to racism!’ Elsewhere, someone has offered the comment that ‘Everyone’s a bit racist sometimes.’ There is a protracted discussion in response to an image of a group of women wearing the Australian flag as hijab, as well as debates about the Iraq war and the status of Tibet. These ‘conversations,’ albeit partial and brief, generate a multiplicity of meanings and arguably push the viewer to actively engage, to seek their own understanding.

While the intentions (and chronologies) of the various contributions are unknown, some of the comments seem deliberately provocative, e.g. ‘Stamp out black people’ in response to the image above. These racist slurs were usually challenged – they were either crossed out, or responded to with passionate (upper case) comments like ‘RACISM SUX.’ On the one hand, these racist contributions could be dismissed as puerile and senseless, however, I propose that they actually represent repressed readings, in response to the imposition of a preferred meaning (i.e. the harmonious global cultural mosaic). I return to this idea of repressed readings later in this paper.
The Benevolent Othering of Disability and Sexuality

Unlike in many other ‘diversity’ exhibitions, images of sexual diversity and disability were represented, as ‘tiles’ in the global cultural mosaic. I want to problematise this minoritarian construction, but, before I do, I want to digress briefly, to acknowledge my own initial excitement – as a white lesbian and mental health consumer – at seeing sexuality and disability included in this ‘celebration of diversity.’ Often ‘diversity’ implicitly means ‘multiculturalism,’ such that the only forms of diversity that are ‘celebrated’ are ethnic, national or religious identities (and, perhaps, gender). Other forms of demographic diversity are rarely imagined as grounds for ‘celebration’ (for example, age, class, income, mental wellbeing, political opinion, size, etc). So, on one level, the inclusion of sexuality and disability was exciting to me personally: inclusion felt preferable to invisibility. I digress to acknowledge my embodied response here to emphasise two points: first, that there are arguably worse fates (including total invisibility) than being the object of benevolent Othering. Second, I want to foreground that these exhibitions – and critiques – intersect with lived social identities.

In terms of representing sexual diversity, two of the images represent minority sexualities: one is an image of ‘Uruguay Sexual Diversity’ (which appears to be an image of a pride parade), while the second is of a ‘Mexico Gay Protest.’ The substance of this protest is impossible to ascertain from the minimal information provided – like the racialised protest discussed earlier, a vague sympathetic response seems to be encouraged. The accompanying texts frame each image in terms of ‘sexual diversity’, but it’s unclear whether this ‘diversity’ describes diversity within this community, or whether in the overall exhibition context (the global cultural
mosaic) the images are to be interpreted in terms of relatively homogenous – albeit colourful – sexual minorities, alongside ‘ethnic’ minorities.

Within academic explorations of sexuality, there is disagreement over whether sexuality is most usefully examined in terms of ‘minoritarian’ identities (Cameron & Kulick, 2006:63), such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or whether – as various queer theorists have suggested – minoritarian strategies reinscribes the normative status of heterosexuality, exempting it from critical investigation. For example, McRuer writes that

> By constituting homosexuality as an object of knowledge, heterosexuality also constitutes itself as a privileged stance of subjectivity, as the very condition of knowledge - and thereby avoids becoming an object of knowledge itself, the target of a possible critique. (McRuer, 2006:209)

Moreover, ‘erotophobia’ plays a role in the exhibition. Although experiences of homophobia are never mentioned in conjunction with sexual minorities (compare the acknowledgement of racism), social regulation of sexuality is clearly evident. Homosexuality is imputed in the comments section, in response to two images in which men are in close proximity – one showing Pell hospitably greeting Rauf, the other of Buddhist monks sitting together for prayers.

In terms of disability presence, the one overtly relevant image displays Cuban disabled people participating in a fun run to raise money for cancer research. The inclusion of this image is on the one hand laudable: many disability scholars have specifically lamented the omission of disability from multiculturalism discourses (e.g.
(Gilson & Dupoy, 2000; Jakubowicz & Meekosha, 2001, 2002; Pfeiffer, 1998). But, as in studies of sexuality, there are disagreements within disability studies over whether a minoritarian approach is desirable, or whether a more radical critique is needed, challenging the social construction of ‘normative bodies’ (e.g. Davis, 1999; McRuer, 2006).

While this image is ostensibly a ‘positive’ disability image – there’s certainly no hostility in either the image or explanatory text – its framing draws on models of disability that are criticised within disability studies. As Snyder and Mitchell (Snyder & Mitchell, 2001:374) write, ‘disability studies developed a social model founded on the idea that disability was not embedded in defective biologies, but rather in faulty social structures.’ Some disability theorists (e.g. Clare, 1999, Johnson, 2006) reason that ‘the dominant story about disability should be about ableism’ (Clare, 1999:2), the ‘faulty social structures’ rather than the idea of ‘defective biologies’. By contrast, this image associates disability with charitable and medical models of disability, through the context of raising money for medical research.

At this point, I want to return to the stated aim of the exhibition, to ‘celebrate diversity,’ and ask what it could mean to ‘celebrate’ disabled people (or for that matter, sexual diversity). Inclusion in the ‘global cultural mosaic’ isn’t the same as celebration of one’s desirable attributes. In this exhibition context, viewers responded to the image of disability with derision – people joked about disabled people not having sex and about ‘having two working legs’ being better than ‘winning gold at the paralympics.’ Disability theorist Cheryl Marie Wade has argued that disabled people are rarely framed as desirable. For example, she comments
‘I don’t think most universities have an attitude towards disabled people of: “here’s a group we want to welcome into our community. Here’s people we want to have here, we want to extend a positive effort.”’ (Mitchell & Snyder, 1995)

Rather than exploring how diverse ways of being may have value in their own right, we are encouraged to view disability through a lens of benevolent Othering, which externalises and minoritises.

**The benevolent Othering of children**

A final theme I want to explore is the representational value of children; they play an important role in this exhibition, as well as in other discourses of benevolent Othering. Children are not just another form of diversity, but are the most potent symbol for benevolent Othering. Children are discursively useful because they *pose no sovereign threat*. Dicks notes that very powerful Others don’t tend to be framed as forming part of the ‘global cultural mosaic’ (Dicks, 2003:29).10 Children, by contrast, can play the role of the powerless Other, as having no independent, threatening will of their own. Adults are implicated in more complex and ambivalent relationships of power, responsibility and control. Thus, when racialised or disabled Others (but, importantly not sexual identities) are represented through children, complexities and ambivalences are simplified – it is clear that they represent no sovereign threat, and a relationship of benevolent Othering is legitimised.11

*PNG Harmony Day,* from *DS: Different but the same,* Melbourne University Overseas Student Service, April 2008.
Thus, a smiling (white) Australian police officer can be represented with her arms around two smiling Papuan children, in a ‘harmonious’ image. Had these children been adults, this image may have aroused unease, due to potentially conflicting sovereignties. Similarly, in another image, an Indigenous girl is drinking from ‘the only public tap’ in her Northern Territory town. This child can function to legitimise uncomplicated responses of pity and concern, without risking charges of racial paternalism. In the comments section accompanying this latter image, many of the issues silent in explanatory text – issues of Indigenous dispossession, alcoholism, assimilation and responsibility – are raised.

**Benevolent Othering as self-affirming**

At this point, I want to return to the idea of these exhibitions as ‘self-affirming’ exercises. I suggest that they function partly as displays of ‘benevolent Othering.’ There are commonalities at this point between benevolent Othering and what has been described as ‘political correctness.’ The explanatory texts arguably recommend appropriate ways to respond to diversity.

John Callahan, a disability comedian, has said of proponents of political correctness: ‘they impose these ‘correct ways’ of looking at things on the culture. It has the effect of being very smothering and stultifying. … It takes away all spontaneity and all truthfulness.’(Callahan, 1990) I suggest that some of the comments may have been motivated by a resistance to being ‘smothered’, and an expression of their own ‘spontaneity’ and ‘truthfulness’. They resisted the preferred meanings (benevolent
Othering), offering ‘repressed readings’ instead, either a creative reading or an overtly hostile response. These readings disrupt the ‘official’ discourses.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the position of the international students responsible for this exhibition. I suggest they occupy an ambivalent space in regards to the diversity exhibited. They did not include themselves amongst the images of ‘celebrated’ cultural diversity, but they were the focus of all four image-less texts, which argued that they ‘enrich’ the Australian education system but are unfairly discriminated against (in terms of transport concessions). There are implicit connections between themselves and the ‘celebrated’ diversity, through inclusion in the same exhibition. Of course, this positioning may have been determined by logistical considerations (for example the unavailability of suitable images of international students) or perhaps by a sense of it being immodest to offer one’s own culture for ‘celebration.’ It is also possible that they didn’t present themselves as objects for display and discussion out of a preference for being the benevolent sovereign – at least in the context of this exhibition – rather than the ‘celebrated’ Other.

The ‘conversations’ generated in the comments section are one of the most valuable features of this exhibition. Ien Ang (amongst others) has argued that such ‘conversations’ are imperative if we are to learn to ‘live together in harmony.’ (Ang, 2008:230) The value of the conversations in this exhibition are limited, lacking the involvement of those represented in the images (Ang’s notion of the ‘conversation’ specifically engages with the Other), as well as lacking sustained engagement. What these conversations do, however, is to expose some of the ‘faultlines in the cultural
mosaic,’ (Dicks, 2003:150), revealing contradictions and complexities repressed by discourses of benevolent Othering. Such contradictions, complexities, conflicts and ambivalences are integral if we are to better understand Others – and not merely affirm our own goodness through benevolent Othering.

Word Count: 2966 words.
References


[videorecording :]. Boston, MA: Brace Yourselves Productions : Fanlight
Productions [distributor].


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1 I use this expression in its Foucaultian sense, to refer to the ‘systematic operation of several discourses or statements constituting a ‘body of knowledge,’ which work together to construct a specific object/topic of analysis in a particular way, and to limit the other ways in which that object may be constituted.’ (Lidchi, 2007):191

2 As noted earlier, “public space” is understood broadly. Obviously, a university campus is exclusive in many important respects; the exhibition was “public” in the sense that (a) access was unrestricted and (b) people could view the texts without needing to enter into a physical space specifically dedicated to the “issue” represented. My study examines texts that can thus be consumed, incidentally. I use the expression “public space” as a shorthand.


4 In fact, Harmony Day has gone international – one of the images in the exhibition was of Australian Police celebrating “Harmony Day” in Papua New Guinea. This, however, does not negate its national(ist) dimensions.

5 I take this expression from (Moreton-Robinson, 2000) and (Hage, 2000)
The exhibition space was also marked out by four upright dummies each wearing a t-shirt with an aphorism about diversity on it (e.g. 'Diversity is the one true thing we all have in common. Celebrate it every day.') While these aphorisms are fascinating in their own right, they were spatially separate from the rest of the exhibition and will not be discussed in this paper.

At this point, it is worth noting that there is extensive critical discussion problematizing the framing of any 'identity' within this multicultural framework, (Ang, 2001; Goldberg, 1994; Hage, 2000; Hall, 1989; Hesse, 2000).

It’s worth noting that on two images, disparaging comments were made about people’s size – in one, a joke was made about ‘the Biggest Loser Box Hill’ and in another someone was called ‘fatty.’ Clearly, for these respondents, diversity in size is a legitimate target for derision.

'Erotophobia' – a term coined by Cindy Patton – is ‘the terrifying, irrational reaction to the erotic which makes individuals and society vulnerable to psychological and social control in cultures where pleasure is strictly categorized and regulated.’ (1985:103)

It is interesting to note that one of the images was of ‘South Korean Afghanistan Kidnappings,’ which framed as ‘victims’ the South Korean missionaries who had been kidnapped in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Arguably, this framing was necessary for the overall construction the theme – in which the complexities of power, agency and responsibility were reduced to ‘victims’ and ‘suffering.’

This isn’t to say that adults are always benevolent to children – one viewer wrote ‘God, I hate kids’, while others read paedophilic potential in adults framed as benevolent by the explanatory text. Nor am I saying that children are passive, grateful recipients of adult paternalism. However, I argue that within discourses of benevolent Othering, children – rather than adults – tend to be preferred.