

**EREWTHON**

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Brook Andrew | Mikala Dwyer and Justene Williams | Tony Garifalakis | Claire Lambe | Clare Milledge

# **Stigma: the work of the Straightener**

IN AUSTRALASIA, 1872 CARRIED WITH IT AT least three major new beginnings in public dialogue around the common practice of confining criminals alongside other marginalised members of society in one big penitentiary, an all-purpose lock-up. This was (and continues to be) the result of longstanding criminalisation of socially stigmatised identities; in the Victorian era, chief among these were those living with mental health conditions, cognitive and physical disabilities, illness and severe poverty.<sup>1</sup>

1872 brought the publication of Samuel Butler’s meditation on society’s arbitrary legislation of what may constitute ‘criminal’ affects and behaviours in *Erewhon*, where those with ‘moral ailments’ (ie criminal disposition to theft, murder, etc) are not punished by law but kept in line by ‘Straighteners’, while Erewhonians who manifest a physical illness of any kind, even a light indisposition, are publicly prosecuted and jailed. And it was also in 1872 that English social reform advocates Rosamund and Florence Hill embarked for Australia, where they would continue their ongoing inspections of prisons, reformatories and schools, furthering the era’s abiding interest in penal reform, especially via cross-cultural studies as practised by John Howard in the late 18th century.<sup>2</sup> While the sisters don’t mention coming across *Erewhon* directly, their travels led them to develop an equally powerful (if somewhat less fancifully articulated) travelogue-cum-treatise on prison and social reform, *What we saw in Australia*, which they published in 1875.

The third action of 1872 initiated the first bangs on the grid in Mikala Dwyer and Justene Williams’ *Captain Thunderbolt’s Sisters*. It was the first full year of running the Biloela Reformatory and Industrial School for Girls on Cockatoo Island, where prison management had arrived at the decision that the only way to counter the prison’s notoriously sinister reputation was to engage in a rebranding exercise. As Rosamund and Florence Hill wrote upon visiting Biloela, the prison hoped to become the new host for the ‘wholesome training

of girls’ (though the sisters felt it was already falling grimly short of that aspiration): ‘it was hoped, too, that by abandoning a name connected in the public mind with all that is evil in gaol-life, and resuming the aboriginal appellation of the island – Biloela – prison associations would be forgotten, and the girls would escape the dreaded reproach of having “been at Cockatoo.”’<sup>3</sup> Notionally, Biloela had a split population: orphans and destitute girls lived in the Industrial School and women convicted of crimes inhabited the Reformatory. The pure structural fact, however, that children and women alike lived in the ‘former’ prison cells, drew on the same inadequate resources for furthering their development, and were not physically separated from each other<sup>4</sup> insisted on a fully mature cross-pollination of stigma: two institutions or no, the girls and women were all criminalised. Side-by-side in *Captain Thunderbolt’s Sisters* and *Red Rockers*, not only do Mikala Dwyer and Justene Williams return the bang on the grid across nearly 150 years, but they precipitate Biloela’s half-heartedly maintained dual channel identity in the becoming-criminal of girl/woman: institution/reformatory, destitute/prostitute, striped/stripped, adventurer/rescuer, upthewalls/onherknees, banging/banged/banged-up. And that’s not travelling across 150 years.

*Stigma* is a sprawling term, an unusual term endowed with all the abject torsions of a fun-house mirror. The house lights are up, and it’s a giant hook coming off of stage right. Yanking you, tentacular in its reach, carrying semantic resonances from Christ’s wounds to slave branding, all the way to cellular biology and the ligature of Greek letters, it is a prime example of Judith Butler’s notion of performativity as ‘that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.’<sup>5</sup> True to its roots as a visual marker, it’s the name of a tattoo bar in Orlando, Florida<sup>6</sup>, where another bar stands – Pulse – recently the epicentre of murderous stigma-driven violence in June 2016. That the attack on the LGBTQ community also resulted in initial preconceptions

about the attacker’s motives – Muslim, ergo terrorist – led to a stigma-squared, is no small testament to its indiscriminately discriminate tendencies. At some point in its endless proliferation, stigma has metastasized from mere word to talismanic status: it’s no longer somebody’s word, but any body can be owned by the word. It is a state of perception that we receive, perpetuate, and participate in.<sup>7</sup> As sociologist Erving Goffman’s ground-breaking investigation *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* describes, although there are many whose lives are irrevocably compromised due to possessing attributes that render the individual immediately ‘discredited’: physical or intellectual ability, ethnic background, gender, social class, age; there are also those who are susceptible to stigma in ways that may at first elude the outrageously sharpened perceptual apparatus of the ‘normals’ by dint of belonging to a ‘discreditable’<sup>8</sup> group: those with a criminal background, complex mental health condition, non-heteronormative sexualities, genders, identities; not yet perceived, but endlessly on the edge of being perceived.

‘[He has] a truly fugitive face’: this was the extraordinary statement of Louise Hearman on winning the 2016 Archibald prize for her portrait of Barry Humphries.<sup>9</sup> To slip facially, to give the slip, to flee perception, covering, passing, as Tony Garifalakis’s suspect-subject would say, ‘Anything is Possible.’ The fugitive in front of you at the shooting range is our own white middle-aged male brow, creasing in focus at just what fugitive slip-face is down the barrel of our gun. If we’ve been passing, it might be our own. Speaking still more to the context that Hearman probably intended, Garifalakis’s *Hills Have Eyes* complicates our myopic, wandering focus on those camo shapes intended to bewilder us into thinking, ‘yep, nobody here – guess I’ll just be on my way.’ Maybe let the limp back into our stride a little.<sup>10</sup> As the eternal referent, non-stigma carrying identities stay invisible while maintaining an infinite presence: camouflaged white man, eternal panopti/con. Of course, that’s who we *assume* is behind

there. Maybe it’s because the camo shapes look like primitive cock-n-balls graffiti.

Goffman uses the term ‘spoiled’ to describe the identity maligned by stigma; perhaps the affective experience of bearing a stigma could be otherwise articulated as the feeling of undesirable difference without possibility of restitution. A, perhaps the, perception of the self suddenly as fragments detaching from a social main-frame of identity signification, in a moment where ‘[p]erceptually, stigma becomes the master status, the attribute that colours the perception of the entire person.’<sup>11</sup> Undesirable, different, detached, posing only a partial solution: in Sara Ahmed’s theory of queer phenomenology, this matrix of sensation within the social skin becomes a disorientation, a departure from the lines and axes of normativity that is crucially affirming to the stigmatised subject (and here, I recall the grid on the wall off which Dwyer and Williams spring). Disorientation is “the ‘becoming oblique’ of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior [...] a queer phenomenology would function as a disorientation device; it would not overcome the “disalignment” of the horizontal and vertical axes, allowing the oblique to open up another angle on the world.’<sup>12</sup> Such an opening of the oblique, and queering of directionality, is radically at work in Claire Lambe’s *Miss Universal*. The disorientating pin-up of her image to the rack implies an invitation to swivel it throughout the space, in defiant recalibration of what or who may constitute (or come to constitute) foreground and background, those bodies eternally in the periphery. The partial woman beckons you, not to complete her, but to stand alongside her with your own feet of clay. These figures will not turn, though the world hails them<sup>13</sup>: ‘we hear the hail, and even feel its force on the surface of the skin, but we do not turn around, even when those words are directed toward us. Having not turned around, who knows where we might turn. Not turning also affects what we can do.’<sup>14</sup> Approaching the rack, there is every possibility

to remantle yourself, as with a cape.

*To have stolen a pair of socks, or “to have the socks” (in more colloquial language), was a recognised way of saying that the person in question was slightly indisposed.* Samuel Butler, *Erewhon*, 1872.<sup>15</sup>

In the hypnagogic half-light of Clare Milledge’s *The Bisonity of Self* we encounter an intriguing pair of socks. They are incongruous and redly benipped on a figure who appears in a sleep paralysis, jaundiced face rigid with the onset of dreaming. We come upon this figure who is clearly ‘having the socks’; a thoroughly Erewhonian attempt is made to conceal the indisposition: fully covered, head bandaged up, possibly post-surgery on the down low, this is more than a case of the sniffles as the size of the receptacle on the figure’s chest will attest. Samuel Butler’s formulation of physical indisposition as site of condemnation meets a long tradition of critical discourse among sociologists and cultural theorists around illness as socially constructed: disease and diagnosis all too frequently result in ready abstractions of the condition as somehow earned by the person, irrefutable evidence of deviance. The deleterious impacts on healthcare and health policy cannot be understated.<sup>16</sup> Milledge’s flask, as with any demon or cat on the chest, will suck any fevered avowals of the figure’s actual state away before they can be coughed up into the air-at-large. The figure’s fear of exposure is cinched by that waiting rope at the foot of the bed, so casually curved, gathering together all the obstacles of the physical body, and the dream body, into the noose of the social.

In Australia in 1872, Aboriginal residents at Coranderrk were gradually losing control of agricultural development of their land to the Aboriginal Protection Board, and throughout the decade the violent dispossession of Aboriginals from their lands did not relent, as it continues in many ways and means today.

In her keynote address at the 2016 Performance Studies international conference in Melbourne, Rebecca Schneider spoke of today’s ‘commonalities of peril, commons of peril, imperilled commons, and undercommons of the imperilled.’<sup>17</sup> Such a commons finds articulation in Brook Andrew’s *Memory Archive* and *Harvest*. In and through the perils that are perhaps innate to approximating or approaching a commonality, Andrew performs an ‘accumulation by dispossession,’<sup>18</sup> a midden of all that is interstitially gathered, evoking a diversity of identities located in the recesses, while utterly refusing any totalizing framework. The compass whirls around in its casing: the passage around vitrine and object bends his archive into pure affect. Within this space, stigma drives the abject-lesson but is transcended by the object-lesson: our own selves in the oblique passage though Andrew’s work, deviating, following, failing to straighten, turning, not-turning, rebelling, disorientating, approaching.

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- 1 For a discussion on how fully prison systems continue to intersect with disability today, see Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, Allison C. Carey, eds, *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- 2 John Howard’s work led to the development of The Howard League for Penal Reform: <http://howardleague.org/john-howard/>
- 3 Rosamund and Florence Hill, *What we saw in Australia* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1875), p. 283.
- 4 *ibid.*, p. 285.
- 5 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. xii.
- 6 <http://www.stigmatattoos.com>
- 7 Lerita Coleman Brown, ‘Stigma: An Enigma Demystified’, in *The Disability Studies Reader* Davis, Lennard J., ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013).
- 8 Goffman uses the terms ‘normal’, ‘discredited’ and ‘discreditable’ throughout his study.
- 9 Steph Harmon, ‘Louise Hearman wins Archibald prize for Barry Humphries portrait’, *The Guardian*, 15 July 2016.
- 10 A reference to the *The Usual Suspects* seemed highly appropriate here, as Benecio Del Toro playing Fenster says: ‘He’ll flip ya, flip ya for real..’ (dir Bryan Singer, 1995).
- 11 Brown, ‘Stigma: An Enigma Demystified’, p. 152.
- 12 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 162, 172.
- 13 See Judith Butler’s discussion of ‘turning’ in response to Althusser’s interpellation (Butler 1997, ca. p. 33; Ahmed 2006, p. 15)
- 14 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 107.
- 15 Samuel Butler, *Erewhon and Erewhon Revisited* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2015), p. 65.
- 16 For an overview of the field, see Peter Conrad and Kristin K Barker, ‘The Social Construction of Illness: Key Insights and Policy Implications’, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51(S) (2010), pp. S67–S79.
- 17 *Extending a Hand: Gesture, Duration and the Posthumous Turn*, keynote by Rebecca Schneider delivered at PSI Melbourne, University of Melbourne, July 9, 2016.
- 18 Schneider, *Extending a Hand*.

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**Brook Andrew, Mikala Dwyer and Justene Williams, Tony Garifalakis, Claire Lambe, Clare Milledge**

Curator: Vikki McInnes

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