Ally – Pride in Diversity Launch

When I was asked to speak at this launch I was happy to oblige. I have been an ‘out’ academic for most of my career. My first tenure-line position was in a large French Language sociology department at the old and rather conservative Universite de Montreal where Jewish people had only very recently been accepted as students and more rarely as staff. In the context of the impending referendum on Quebec’s separation from Canada, the linguistic and nationalistic politics topped any sexual ones. I was more of an anomaly as une Anglophone than as une lesbienne. This was the early 1990s – HIV/AIDS was ravaging gay communities and sexual activism was at its height. It was the time when a whole new sub-field was being developed – queer theory. While it was a challenge to channel some of the new texts into my teaching because it was all in English and not translated, but through the work of Michel Foucault and others I was able to build a small niche of queer cultural studies in the department. I spent a lot of time counselling young students who were trying to come to grips with their sexuality in what was still a quite Catholic and outside of Montreal a deeply rural society. There were of course no places for them to turn, and certainly nothing like what I hope Ally is to achieve.

Arriving at Sydney to take up the Directorship of what was then the Centre for Women’s Studies things were a little different. The then widely read rag LOTL, Lesbians on the Loose did a feature on the new associate professor of Women’s Studies, complete with a photo of me in swimmers and goggles at Bronte – for some unfathomable reason. There were many supportive colleagues for the venture of setting up a department of gender studies with units like Sex, Violence & Transgression. When we moved into our current quarters in the quad, I invited the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence to bless the department. I still have a photo of Stephen Garton, smiling with his young daughter on his knee. For those of you who don’t know, the Sisters perform important roles around the world especially for those who were often ostracised by mainstream churches, especially during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. I’d like to thank again the Mother Superior who is here in his civvies.

This isn’t to say that it was all smooth sailing. While I have never encountered overt homophobia at the university, little things stung – what in ethnic terms is called casual racism. One day talking to a senior man I mentioned how worried I was about finding an apartment – the rental market was pretty stiff even then. ‘Oh you can always get a one bedroom apartment in Darlinghurst’, he said before going on to bemoan how hard it was to find a family home in Pymble.
I was then writing a fortnightly column in *The Australian*. I had carte blanche to write on anything ‘cultural’ and often my columns raised feminist and queer issues from both a personal and academic perspective. I received a fair share of emails proclaiming me to be everything horrible under the sun, including one that wanted to ban me from ever crossing the Murray. However that didn’t prepare me for when I was ‘Bolted’. Andrew Bolt published a full-page demolition of me on the basis that I was ‘a lesbian feminist’ who had received government funding for research on modern Australia cuisine. A dish and a half. The fallout from the then Howard government was immediate and the position I had hoped for on the ARC College of Experts evaporated apparently on the edict of the then Minister of Education. I was devastated but my older brother, a pillar of the Anglican Church in Canada, a former member of Margaret Thatcher’s Research Unit, and a senior adviser to the Canadian Conservative party, was delighted. He loved a political brawl and for many a long-distance phone conversation he tried to convince me to go head to head with Bolt. ‘Come on Betz’, he said, ‘go for it – you can be the poster child for everything they hate’.

While I didn’t take Steve’s advice to shirt front Bolt, his support as well as that of my sister, a British Family Law Court judge, always reminds me that politically issues as complex as sexual ones are never black and white, never the province of the goodies versus the baddies on a political spectrum of left to right. Growing up in rural mid-Wales, I also know that sexual politics are not the sole domain of inner city cafes and bars. While life may be a bit easier for queer urbanites, there are the thousands and thousands of queer and proto-queer kids in rural and remote Australia who are stigmatised because they question their sexuality and who are at risk because of loneliness and shame – the suicide rates especially among young male, Aboriginal, and trans individuals continue to be much higher in rural and remote parts of the country. Of course there are many LGBTIQ people living successful and happy lives beyond the cities.

While I didn’t have a financially privileged childhood, I did and do have a supportive family, and parents who instilled in me the need for a university education even if they couldn’t pay for it. That education allowed me to go from working in bars and waitressing to being a professor here. I sincerely hope that this network will help to provide succour for the young people and adults that don’t have white middle class privileges. Factors such as ethnicity, race, and class can sometimes make it harder to have the cultural capital to take that plunge and to say yes I am different. Even though I have theoretical issues with a shame-pride framing, and indeed with the logics of identity politics, I am proud to position myself within that alphabet soup of LGBTIQ.
Along with my wonderful colleagues and students in our department and across the university we will continue to educate within and outside the university that ‘things don’t have to stay the way they are’, as the French philosopher Michel Foucault always insisted both intellectually and politically. This is to say that our current knowledge-power regimes arise out of historical conjunctures and that they shift and morph over time. Hopefully we are moving into a new regime where sexuality is no longer seen as ‘the truth of ourselves’, and that sexuality, ethnicity, class and race are no longer the markers of negative difference.

I hope this network helps to provide that cultural capital to be able to know that you can change, that your life is not predestined by other people’s ideas about sexuality and gender. That we provide the resources to argue back against all the forms of hate and stupidity that still pervade life in Australia – and elsewhere sometimes with heavier costs – let’s remember that there are many parts of the world where homosexuality is illegal, punishable by the death penalty. The University of Sydney will continue to provide the educational resources to say no we will not put up your homophobia, sexism, transphobia and racism and here’s why. With numbers these arguments will prevail.

Elspeth Probyn
Professor of Gender & Cultural Studies
The University of Sydney
March 3, 2015