

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Priscila, (white) queen of the desert**, by Damien Riggs, New York, Peter Lang, 2006, 126 pp., £15.00 (paperback), ISBN 0820486582

Queer rights and race privilege are two areas of scholarly enquiry which seldom feature side by side, but Riggs manages very successfully to integrate these two theoretical concerns in his approach to queer rights and representation in the context of colonial nations. It is no easy task to discuss simultaneously the rights of non-heterosexual individuals, which constitute one pressing social issue, and the inherent privileges, which Riggs views as being endowed upon both heterosexual and non-heterosexual white Australians on the basis of 'race'. This short book covers an enormous range of issues pertinent to the intersections of postcolonial, queer and critical race studies, including identity issues, morality, the family unit and history. Moreover, a recurrent message in the book is that of the need for greater critical reflexivity regarding the speaking positions of those who most commonly seek, in an active fashion, queer rights. More specifically, this concerns race privilege, which Riggs views as being inextricably entwined with the position of white (queer) individuals in Australian society vis-à-vis non-white (queer) individuals. One key point here is that 'race' constitutes an over-arching identity, which takes precedence over sexuality, in Australian society. This book offers an insightful and provocative account of the potential ideological implications of white queer identity and equality claims for those who may not self-identify in this way but who nonetheless are 'spoken for'.

In the introduction, the reader is introduced to the key concepts covered in the book. In particular, the reader is afforded insight into the interpretative framework of the author, who self-identifies as a white gay man and who acknowledges the automatic 'race privilege' afforded to him by virtue of this identity configuration. Indeed this constitutes a central concern in the book, namely that white people, queer or not, are the automatic recipients of 'race privilege' vis-à-vis their non-white counterparts. Riggs is careful not to essentialise the notion of identity and, thus, he cautiously employs the term 'queer' to explore 'some of the *potential* ways in which queer privilege may operate'. As the title of the book suggests, the 1994 film *The Adventures of Priscila, Queen of the Desert* constitutes an important anchor for making sense of the intersections of 'race privilege' and queer rights. In the introduction, Riggs discusses some of the filmic representations to allow the reader insight into how queer rights and identity claims may operate in Australian society, which is represented in terms of a postcolonial nation. Such creativity in attempting to elucidate the somewhat esoteric interface of 'race' and sexuality is commendable, but unfortunately the film ceases to be employed as an explanatory anchor in the chapters which follow (with the exception of the concluding chapter).

Riggs' coverage of colonial contexts in Chapter 2 allows considerable insight into the legal and historical factors which allegedly contributed to widespread understandings of white queer identities as 'individual practices'. It is argued that white queer people, despite their positioning as pathological and deviant, benefit from the Australian legal system,

which preserves the privilege of white people vis-à-vis non-white people. For example, Riggs provides insight into the history of legislation regarding homosexuality. Crucially, he attributes the relaxation of this legislation to a 'logic of ownership', whereby white citizens of Australia would continue to be eligible to own land and to ensure the continuity of a largely white-ruled Australia. In short, Riggs argues that it was in the interests of the *white* nation of Australia to safeguard the property rights of all white Australians regardless of sexual orientation. Riggs' careful analysis of some of the contextual factors implicated in white privilege also attends to gender differences; white queer men are said to enjoy relatively higher privilege than white queer women. Crucially, this is attributed to the desire of the white colonial nation to preserve landownership of whites and to deny Indigenous sovereignty. Clearly, such a nuanced, original socio-cultural analysis actively encourages the advocates of (white) queer rights to interrogate race privilege and to consider how the rights demanded by white queer people may in turn impact the lives of non-white queer people.

The book reconsiders the value of claims of 'injured identities' by queer people as a means of gaining rights by highlighting the consequential construction of queer people as 'damaged' while simultaneously legitimating particular forms of 'pain'. Riggs links this notion to race privilege through his argument that the 'loudest' voices to be heard in campaigns for queer rights are those of *white* queer people, who cannot possibly speak for non-white queer people. This is said to perpetuate *white* queer injury as the focal point in the queer rights campaign, which again disregards the presence and experiences of non-white queer people. A key point in Riggs' book is the notion that by claiming rights on the basis of pain and injury, queer people risk being viewed by non-queer people as seeking 'special rights' which induce 'reverse racism' towards white Australians and a policy of 'political correctness'. These points are convincingly illustrated through extracts from speeches of Pauline Hanson, an Australian Member of Parliament and leader of the One Nation political party. These rights are claimed in addition to those taken-for-granted rights, which are associated specifically with all (white) Australians. Crucially, the need to 'prove our pain' is discouraged by Riggs, given that genuine, lasting equality can only be achieved by laying claim to those rights routinely enjoyed by heterosexuals under heteropatriarchy, whereby heterosexuality and patriarchy are constructed as the 'natural' order in society. One of the major credentials of this section of the book concerns the potential implications of constructions of white queer 'injured identities' for non-white queer people, which Riggs discusses in considerable depth.

In Chapter 4, Riggs' arguments regarding the feasibility of moral authority in the white queer struggle for equality are fascinating though somewhat unsettling given that he actively highlights one of the taken-for-granted 'realities' associated with the moral authority of the dominant group in society. He convincingly argues that while activists deplore the heterosexism pervasive in Australian society, they consistently fail to reflect upon their relationship to 'Indigenous sovereignty'. It is noteworthy that Riggs makes no secret of his belief in the complete 'Indigenous sovereignty' over the land which is now called Australia. He elaborates the paradox inherent in white queer activism by highlighting the notion that the rhetoric of equality frequently prioritises the values of white, often middle-class lesbian and gay individuals, which in turn is said to contribute to the oppression of already excluded groups, such as ethnic minorities. It is at this point that central ideas from the preceding chapters form a coherent whole; the colonial context of Australia and the 'speaking positions' employed in claims for equality are said to merit extensive critical reflexivity. For instance, what is the relationship of the white queer activist to Indigenous sovereignty?

What rights are accorded to white queer claimants of equality? Riggs postulates that only through self-reflection, inclusive of the overt acknowledgement of the 'race privilege' *inherent* in one's position as a white individual in a postcolonial society, can activists possibly challenge mutual and inextricably entwined oppressions of heterosexism *and* racism. This claim is particularly convincing when considered within the broader context of social scientific research into sexuality and race, which frequently obscures the speaking position of the researcher and eschews reflexivity in a quest for 'objectivity'. This is true not only of race and sexuality research but of social scientific, and especially quantitative, research in general (Jaspal, 2009). A particularly thought-provoking aspect of Riggs' argumentation, which ensues from his discussion of moral authority, is his meticulous deconstruction of the notion of morality itself. For Riggs, to speak of morality is to explore how 'moral values' operate to oppress, to discriminate and to perpetuate 'injury' against marginalised groups and individuals. This line of argument elucidates the 'unearned' moral authority of the white queer individual.

In the final chapter, Riggs eloquently unites some of the key theoretical points which emerge from his discussion of queer rights and race privilege, providing the reader with an insightful framework for regarding inherently racialised queer politics in postcolonial Australia. The complex issues he invokes are explained through analogy with the film upon which the title of his book is based, namely *Priscila, Queen of the Desert*. Although it is argued that white queer belonging is problematised in the film, Riggs provides no definitive answers regarding white queer individuals' sense of belonging in postcolonial Australia. He alludes to the notion that 'all that space' (i.e. territories not settled by white Australians) is the source of the troubled sense of belonging in white queer identity, which raises interesting questions regarding the interface between sexual and national identities. This is one particularly interesting aspect of the book, which merits further discussion elsewhere (see, e.g. Jaspal, 2010; Jaspal & Cinnirella, in press).

In short, this is a complex and wide-ranging book, which covers enormous ground. There is little doubt that this constitutes an important contribution to the emerging area of the social sciences, which considers the interface of queer rights and race privilege. Thus, this is a book which will prove a useful resource for researchers exploring, or hoping to explore, issues related to queer rights, race privilege and critical reflexivity. Although Riggs deals almost exclusively with the postcolonial Australian context, some of the ideological processes described in the volume are likely to be applicable beyond the socio-cultural boundaries of Australia. In particular, it has been observed in a British study that 'race' may be constructed in terms of a superordinate identity, which takes precedence over sexuality (Jaspal & Cinnirella, in press). The prioritisation of 'race' over sexuality, which is likely to have implications for interpersonal and intergroup behaviour, may arise from the social representation of white 'race privilege' held by many ethnic minority queer individuals. This is broadly coterminous with Riggs' argument. Crucially, this short book will send out an important message to researchers of this interface, namely that race privilege does exist, that it plays an important role in the social world and that its real-world implications cannot and should not be ignored.

## References

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**What do gay men want?: an essay on sex, risk and subjectivity**, by David M. Halperin, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2009, 169 pp., \$17.95 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-472-03365-2

It is safe to say that David Halperin has a problem with psychological and psychoanalytic theory. *What do gay men want* forcefully challenges psychological perspectives which frame contemporary gay male subjectivity in terms of erotic risk. Comparing and contrasting qualitative and quantitative empirical studies on gay men's sexual practices, theoretical analyses of negotiated risk and safety, and HIV/AIDS prevention policies, Halperin sets out to rescue unprotected anal sex from psychoanalytic interpretation. The problem with psychological analyses, he argues, is that they individualise, personalise, and pathologise gay male risk taking. What's required, he insists, is the elaboration of a model of 'gay sexual subjectivity without psychology' (p. 84).

It is in some ways curious then, but perhaps not surprising, that the first half of book is spent reproducing and evaluating the question of 'what makes gay men do it'? In his attempt to save the rectum from emotional deficit theories Halperin shifts his attention from the actions of the individual risk taker to the social context of unsafe sex. By shifting his attention away from the individual, Halperin points out condomless sex is not a pathological impulse motivated by unconscious self-destructive desires but a sexual practice which concerns gay men's *abject* social status as excluded, denigrated sexual outlaws.

Drawing on, and extending the work of Julia Kristeva on abjection, Halperin develops a gay standpoint which examines 'the play of social power' by 'describ[ing] the shape of gay men's relations to their world' (p. 71). The utility of this 'non-normalising account of risk taking' (p. 59), he argues, is that we begin to think of gay subjectivity 'on its own terms', 'without either inviting the accusation of pathology or aggressively defending ourselves against it (by insisting, for example, that gay is good)' (p. 69). Rather than interpret risky gay sex (including the desire for HIV infection) through the lens of individual pathology, Halperin sees it as 'a collective response to social humiliation' (p. 91). The genius of gay sex, he contends, is 'its ability to transmute otherwise unpleasant experiences of social degradation into experiences of pleasure' (p. 87). Halperin's queer intervention thus enacts a social – as opposed to psychological – method for analysing 'the affective structure of gay male subjectivity' (p. 57). The real strength of this move lies with Halperin's account of the joy of abject pleasures. Sex without condoms, according to Halperin, is not just an issue of negotiated safety but a collective form of social resistance. Risk taking in this sense is a transgressive, non-normative *social* response to stigma, shame and fear.