

**Queer theory and its future in psychology: Exploring issues of race  
privilege**

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As Clarke and Peel (2007) note in their recent edited collection on 'LGBTQ psychologies', queer theory is slowly being recognised for the impact it has made upon the study of both heteronormativity and non-heterosexual sexualities within the discipline of psychology. Whilst this has primarily occurred within the context of the UK (e.g. Barker and Hegarty 2005; Hegarty 1997, 2001; Hegarty and Massey 2006), queer theory (or what, in places, represents a 'queer sensibility', as Clarke and Peel term it) has also been employed by researchers working in the discipline of psychology within Australia (e.g., Riggs 2005; Riggs and Walker 2006), New Zealand (e.g., Braun 2000), Canada (e.g., Minton 1997) and the US (e.g., Israel, 2004). This small, but growing use of queer theory within psychology represents an important trend towards acknowledging the impact of other disciplines and fields upon psychology, and more specifically, highlights some of the complex ways in which 'queer histories' have long shaped the discipline of psychology itself (for elaborations of this see Hegarty 2004, 2007; Riggs in-press).

In writing a paper on the use of queer theory in psychology, it is important to engage with the question of terminology, and in particular the use of the word 'queer'. Queer theory itself may be broadly understood as a critique of heteronormativity, and more precisely, the binaries of 'normal' and 'deviant' that structure Western societies in regards to sexuality. The term 'heteronormativity' thus refers to a set of complex social relations and institutionalised power structures wherein heterosexuality is taken as the 'normal' sexuality from which all others deviate. This has implications not only for the representation of non-heterosexual people, but for the ways in which gender is taken to represent an *a priori* truth that reflects 'real' things about 'men' and 'women'. Heteronormativity, however, is also formed in a relationship to other

social norms, such as those related to race and class (amongst others). Unfortunately, queer theorists (much like many academic fields more generally) have largely neglected to examine these concurrent forms of identification as they circulate *simultaneously* with (and through) sexual identities (though see Barnard 2003; Riggs 2006a). As I will continue to elaborate throughout this paper, issues relating to the racial politics of queer theory must be considered central to the ongoing development and application of queer approaches to psychology in order to ensure that the use of queer theory within psychology does not perpetuate a particularly *white* interpretation of sexual identities (see Greene 2000 and Riggs 2007 for an elaboration of the problems of racial hegemony within psychological research on non-heterosexual people more broadly).

Additionally, any mention of the word 'identities' requires clarification when being used in the context of queer theory. One of the key moves made by queer theorists has been towards a focus on sexual *practices*, rather than sexual *identities*. In this sense queer theory has provided a critique of the problems associated with identity categories (and their attendant politics), namely that the reification of particular 'essential' identities serves to perpetuate particular categories (such as 'sexuality') as representing *a priori* truths, thus discouraging a focus on their historical and cultural contingencies. Queer theory thus shifts our focus to the practices that people engage in, and does not necessarily tie these to particular identities. Yet the category 'queer' itself is also used to claim or stake out a location that both rejects fixed categories or simplistically knowable terms of reference, whilst nonetheless cohering around the concept of 'queer' as a challenge to heteronormativity. Indeed, this signals the utility of the term 'queer': as a form of reclamation, 'queer' is left

open to resignification (i.e. in its function as a reference to practices that disjoin signification from identification), in addition to its utility for marking precisely that which is queer (i.e. those who challenge heteronormativity or those who mark their sexual practices as 'queer'). In this sense, 'queer' functions both as a verb (as in queer theorising or the 'queering' of particular norms), and as a noun (as a descriptor for people who mark themselves as such, or a referent to particular applications of queering – e.g. 'queer theory'). These multiple, flexible and indeed often contradictory usages of 'queer' are thus arguably central to its appeal as a challenge to heteronormativity.

Of course, in being a practice of critique (in multiple forms – as speech, as sexual practice, as written word, as visual imagery and many combinations of these and more), 'queer', or queer theory more precisely, is no more outside structures of power than any other account of society (Barker and Hegarty 2005). Indeed, this point may be considered central to queer theory itself – it constitutes an acknowledgment of the mutual constitution of that which is marked as 'queer' and that which is marked as 'normal'. Heterosexuality is founded (or indeed founders) upon its abjected other (i.e. those people marked as deviant, or non-heterosexual), whilst queer is very much a position held in opposition to that marked as 'normal'. As such, in labeling something or oneself 'queer', one does not step outside of power relations. And it is this point that I will elaborate throughout the remainder of this paper through a series of interconnected points, with a focus on the race privilege held by white people who identify as 'queer' or otherwise non-heterosexual/critical of heteronormativity, alongside that held by those of us who seek to conduct psychological research through the lens of queer theory.

Much as norms around sexuality privilege heterosexual people (and by implication oppress non-heterosexual people), racial norms accord considerable privilege to white people that comes at the expense of people identified as non-white. Whilst of course there are many differences *amongst* white people, those of us who identify as white nonetheless share in a wide range of benefits that come from living in societies that privilege white people. Authors such as McIntosh (1998) and Tannoch-Bland (1998) have elaborated some of the many ways in which white people can go about our daily business precisely because non-white people are most often not as free to do so. It is important to note that examining white race privilege is not intended to induce guilt amongst white people. Rather, the aim of examining privilege is to engender forms of accountability in relation to privilege, and to explore some of the ways in which it may be deployed to potentially more responsible ends. Similarly, examining race privilege is not about 'becoming un-white' (as proponents of 'race traitorship' have suggested). Examining race privilege, particularly in the context of queer theory, is about elaborating what I have termed elsewhere (Riggs 2006a) a new set of 'yes buts' – rather than saying (for example) 'yes I am white, but I experience discrimination as a gay person', white people (who identify as gay), may say instead 'yes I experience disadvantage as a gay person but I do so as a white person who holds considerable privilege'. Talking about race privilege is thus not about reifying racial categories or positing their inevitability, but rather it is about recognising how racial categories are very much treated as if they are real, and thus have very real implications in the lives of all people, not just those marked as non-white.

In what remains of this paper I move away from providing an overview of queer theory (though see Morland and Willox 2005; Sullivan 2003 for excellent readers on the subject, and Moon 2007 for applications of queer theory to psychological practice), and focus on six specific areas that I believe require more attention in regards to the simultaneities of race and sexuality in future applications of queer theorizing within psychology. Some of these extend upon my own writing in the area, whilst others are drawn from the substantial critiques made of (white women's) feminism, queer theory, and lesbian and gay rights movements by African American and Indigenous Australian people. I also draw attention to some of the work currently being undertaken by other white scholars who have focused on issues of race privilege in regards to queer-identified people. My intention in doing so is not to chastise existing work on queer theory within psychology and beyond, but rather to suggest potential new directions for future work in the field, with particular attention to its application to the discipline of psychology. I am aware (as should be the reader) that any critique of what may be termed a 'queer psychology' (or research on non-heterosexual sexualities within psychology more broadly) can potentially be misused to deny the rights of non-heterosexual people, or to delegitimise research in this area. My response to this is twofold: 1) We as academics (and especially those of us who identify as white, middle-class and abled-bodied) cannot stop short of critiquing our peers simply for fear of retribution from other academics – a commitment to exploring the racial politics of queer research must be willing to deal with the discomfort and difficulties this may present us, and 2) speaking about existing limitations, and potential ways of addressing these in contexts such as this journal (and with its particular target audience in mind), is an important means for encouraging critical thinking about developing research areas

and mapping out new directions and possibilities. With these cautionary notes in mind, I now move on to elaborate six of the issues that I see as central to the future use of queer theory within psychology.

## I

The first point, and one that has long been elaborated by African-American (e.g. hooks 1989) and Indigenous (e.g. Moreton-Robinson 2000) feminists in regards to the feminist movement more broadly, refers to what has often been a repeated failure to acknowledge the roots of current rights movements or critical theorising in the works of earlier, most often non-white theorists and activists. McBride (2005) makes a similar claim in relation to queer theory, which he suggests, along with other 'cutting-edge scholarship', "could scarcely have been imagined before the advent of African American studies, ethnic studies, gender studies and so forth" (p. 8). Certainly in my own work on white queer privilege (e.g. 2006a), I have extensively used the writings of non-white people from which to theorise, and yet have at times not adequately acknowledged this intellectual debt and the intellectual histories upon which I am drawing and building. Acknowledging this and addressing it requires not only humility, but also a willingness to actually create spaces where appropriate forms of recognition can be made (see e.g. Riggs 2006b).

Writing from within the US, Reagon (1983) suggests that rights claims such as those made by same-sex attracted people must acknowledge that they build upon early claims for rights such as those made in the US through the civil rights movement. Such movements not only signaled the beginning of a political climate wherein

rights claims could actually be heard by the white (middle-class heterosexual) majority, but where the granting of rights actually resulted in at least some degree of social reform. Importantly, however, writers such as Roberts (2002) remind us that social reform relating to racial equality still lags a long way behind laws intended to prevent discrimination. The fact that many white queer-identified people can push for equal rights in the present is thus a legacy not only of the fact that previous rights claims have been made, but that such rights claims continue in many ways to be denied. So, for example, in Australia the long histories of rights claims made by Indigenous people may be seen to have engendered (at certain moments in time) a willingness by the State to consider the rights claims of other groups. Yet whilst these groups (such as queer people, in organisations typically led by white queer people) continue to make (and at times secure) rights claims, Indigenous people (both heterosexual and non-heterosexual) continue to be denied full acknowledgement of sovereignty and its attendant rights (i.e. to land and reparation).

Thus not only does queer theory build upon early activist/academic work undertaken by a wide range of people, but it does so in a context whereby rights and their practical implementations continue to fall short of the mark for many marginalised groups. As non-white feminists have long suggested in regards to feminism (about which they suggest black women 'fall through the cracks' – as captured in the evocative title of an early collection by Hull, Bell Scott and Smith 1982: *All of the Women are White, all of the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave*), the promotion of particular forms of rights claims will often result in some groups of people being further marginalised. This is something to which queer theory must

attend in regards to the experiences of non-white queer people, as it is not sufficient to simply produce queer theory on the basis of white queer people's lives (Barnard 2003).

## II

Following on from the previous point, it is necessary to examine how issues of individualism and universalism continue to be played out within the context of queer theory. Whilst intended to target the problems associated with claims to universality (i.e. the co-option of a broad range of experiences into one particular (heterosexual) model), queer theory nonetheless involves a range of claims that often do not adequately theorise the locations from which they are made. Thus in making claims about the pervasiveness of heteronormativity, queer theory has often neglected to theorise the *whiteness* of heterosexuality and the historical location of heteronormativity as part of a racialised, classed and gendered hierarchy that has long been central to practices of colonisation. Hoagland (2007), for example, suggests that colonisation in the US largely involved introducing particular forms of hierarchical, individualised relationships to the communities of Indigenous people so as to pave the way for the legitimisation of patriarchal rule across the continent. The legitimisation of patriarchy, and its (variously uptaken) imposition upon Indigenous communities, has allowed white scholars in the present to retrospectively construct violence against women as a 'natural part' of Indigenous communities, rather than recognising that Indigenous communities across the world have been shaped (both forcibly and through active engagement) by colonisation.

As with universalism, the problems associated with individualism (i.e. where rights within Western societies are connected to 'merit', and are thus used to deny discrimination against marginalised groups, or where individual people are pathologised or blamed for the discrimination they face) continue to inform queer theory through its focus on sexual practices. Whilst much queer work on sexual practices provides an intersubjective interpretation of identification (e.g. Foucault 1996), it may be suggested that a focus on the liberatory effects of 'sexual freedom' is in reality a focus on sexual freedom granted only to some, and only on specific terms. As Hoagland again suggests; "The pretense of universality draws upon *particular* contexts and *particular* women while at the same time hiding the particularity by universalising it or representing it as normality (2007, 170). To engage in particular sexual practices as a white queer person does not necessarily require a critical interrogation of how the former part of the identity descriptor (i.e. 'white') often makes possible claims to, and the enactment of, the latter. Moreover, and with particular reference to constructions of 'blame' in regards to the discrimination faced by marginalised group members, whilst white queer people may be depicted by the conservative Right as universally pathological on the basis of our status as queer, we are unlikely to be depicted as pathological on the basis of our whiteness (Riggs 2007). Non-white people (queer or otherwise) are far more likely to be negatively stereotyped both for their racial identity *and* for their sexual identity. The problems of individualism thus may be seen to selectively affect white queer people, whilst more broadly affecting all non-white people.

Finally, and in regard to the discipline of psychology, the individualism and universalism that often inheres to queer rights claims significantly undermines the

application of queer theory to the examination of rights within psychology (Riggs and Walker 2006). This is a product not only of the individualistic approach often adopted within psychology, but also of the ways in which rights claims are often premised upon an individualistic account of queer rights as associated with 'individual pain'. Examining how particular individuals are privileged within accounts of queer rights claims, and the implications of this for the racial politics of queer rights (Hutchison 2000), is an important task facing the application of queer theory to psychological arguments made in the service of queer rights.

### III

Further to the previous point about sexual practices, it is important to recognise that desire is always already shaped in a relationship not just to sexual norms, but to racial norms. As McBride (2005) suggests;

If race is a salient variable in the sex-object choices we make in the gay marketplace of desire (an idea that has long been resisted in favor of an investment in the serendipity of desire and its companion notion of romantic love), then those who benefit unduly under such a system (whites) have a great deal invested in depoliticizing desire (p. 100).

White queer desire for non-white queer-identified people is fundamental to constructions of white queer desire, yet the reverse, whilst no less true, is less often acknowledged within queer theorising or queer practice. Thus, as both McBride and Barnard (2003) elaborate, cross-racial gay male pornography primarily focuses upon

white men's desire for non-white men, with non-white men objectified as mere props in white men's fantasies. Similarly, white queer discourse on cross-racial sex or relationships provides commonplace descriptors for white men (i.e. the 'rice queen' – the white gay man who is primarily attracted to gay Asian men), but accords far less visibility to the language used by those positioned as objects of such white men's desire (i.e. the 'potato queen' – gay Asian men who seek out relationships/sex with white men). White gay men's desire thus becomes the primary focus in the economy of gay male desire (Han 2006). Theorising the hegemony of whiteness within queer communities and in writings on queer desire and sexual practices must therefore come to grips with the ways in which racial hierarchies play out *within* queer communities, and which thus contribute to the marginalisation of non-white queer people.

hooks (1992) suggests that there is the possibility that sexual practices can induce a radical form of self-alienation whereby we become other to ourselves – where sexual acts produce for us moments of awareness of our own non-identicalness and the multiplicities of our desire. Certainly Foucault's work (e.g. 1996) takes up this point and theorises sexual desire as often incommensurable often not just between people, but also *within* people – our desires may not always be reconcilable across contexts or between intent and action (issues in relation to safer sex may be a good example of the this disjuncture between intent and action). Yet this recognition of ourselves as sexual others (and its import for considering how practices of othering function cross-racially) must also involve a racialising of desire whereby it is (for example) a racially marked *white* self that experiences particular sexual practices as self-alienating. Such an approach may engender a form of reflexivity amongst white

queers that challenges not only our supposition of self-unity, but which also forces us to see and account for our whiteness, something that is most often *not* seen when we write simply *as queer people* or live our lives as such.

#### IV

Further in regards to the multiplicities of ‘individual desire’, and in relation to my earlier points about universalisms, it is necessary to consider the queer critique of identity categories, and its implication for the experience of people who identify both as queer and as non-white. In their edited collection on LGBTQ psychologies, Clarke and Peel (2007) suggest that the application of queer theory to psychology highlights:

The need to both shore up and deconstruct identity categories (stable identities are necessary for specific purposes) because different forms and sites of oppression require different political strategies (p. 31).

Clarke and Peel’s point about acknowledging the utility of ‘stable identities’ is an important one for queer theory to consider, particularly in relation to Indigenous writings about identity and relationship to land. In her work on Indigenous belonging, Moreton-Robinson (2003) counters accusations of essentialism that may be leveled at Indigenous theorists who claim an ‘ontological relationship to country’ with the assertion that such accusations are in fact a form of strategic essentialism on the part of white academics who are invested in refuting Indigenous claims to ownership and belonging. In other words, it is only possible to refute ‘ontological

belonging' through claims to essentialism if it is white ways of knowing and understanding epistemology that are being privileged when we consider matters of ontology. In regards to queer theory, the desire to 'deconstruct identity categories', whilst important in regards to their deployment within white systems of knowledge that have historically been limited through a reliance upon identity as individualised, is far less relevant (or indeed may be irrelevant) to Indigenous accounts of identity that posit an essential relationship between land and person (specifically here in the Australian context). To deny the specificity and irrefutability of this relationship, particularly through a queer critique of identity categories as it may be applied to Indigenous people who identify as queer, is to fail to recognise the cultural location of queer critiques and their limitations. Thus I would extend Clarke and Peel's suggestion by stating that not only do uses of identity categories (or claims to ontology) have different political strategies, but they also have differing cultural meanings, and these must be acknowledged and engaged with by queer theorists, rather than applying a universalist interpretation of identity categories.

## V

In relation to the differing ways in which language is used to signify relationships of belonging and identification, it is important to recognise that particular words carry with them the weight of racialised and sexualised histories that have shaped their current meanings. Certainly, queer theorists have often been at the forefront of reclaiming previously derogatory words (i.e. 'queer', 'fag' etc.), or indeed in creating new words to describe particular theoretical insights or to give new meaning to existing words (i.e. Butler's (1990) account of 'performativity'). In these varying

ways, queer theory is thus clearly attuned to the social value of words, and their power to wound or hurt (Butler 1997).

Yet there are still other ways in which queer theory may engage with the implications of its racial politics by encouraging further emphasis on particular forms of language that bring into highlight the racial practices of queer people. One example of this was brought to my attention recently in regards to the aforementioned discussion of 'rice queens' and 'potato queens'. A colleague (Han, pers. comm., April 14 2007) brought my attention to the term 'mashed potato', a term often used by non-white queer-identified people to refer to sexual relations between two white gay men. Terms such as these, whilst having considerably less currency within *white* queer cultures, are uniquely attuned to the racial identities of all same-sex attracted people, rather than simply those who are marked as non-white, or those who engage in cross-racial sex. Further exploration of terms that mark queer desires, queer identities and queer relationships for their racialised location must thus be central to the future of a queer project that aims to engender accountability for the privileges associated with white queer racial identities and which elaborates the varying investments that white queer people have in the racial politics and power differentials that circulate within queer communities.

## VI

The final point I wish to raise here is about coalitionism amongst queer-identified people. Unfortunately, attempts at coalitions across lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer communities (amongst others) are often led not only

by predominantly gay men and lesbian women, but by white gay men and white lesbian women. Coalitionism in this sense becomes a space where white gay men and white lesbian women can appear to be actively engaging with other sexual, gender and racial minorities, where in reality it may be the case that the engagement is only superficial and relatively ad hoc. Barbara Smith elaborates one example of this in her account of the Millennium March held in New York in 2000. In an interview with Kim Diehl (2000), Smith, a member of the Combahee River Collective, outlines how the event demonstrated the ways in which race privilege functions within what are purported to be 'inclusive' and 'diverse' queer events. Smith suggests that the event was primarily shaped by the needs of white queers, as reflected in a focus on single-issue politics, and in a failure to adequately consult during initial planning of the event, rather than as an afterthought aimed at claiming diversity in representation. Smith also calls into question the rhetoric of human rights that circulated around the event, and the direction of such rhetoric by white queers. Smith's account of the event highlights the very complex ways in which race privilege functions within queer communities, and the importance of examining the complicity of white queers with white hegemony.

In the example provided above, the presumed-to-be safe queer space created as part of the Millennium March was in actuality one that was only safe for particular queers. Only particular people were reflected in its demographic, and only particular people were involved in its development. In contrast to the safety that such a space potentially generated for *white* queer people, Reagon (1981) suggests that attempts at coalitions across groups must necessarily evoke discomfort and uncomfortability for those within the groups who occupy a dominant location. Indeed, she suggests

that coalition work is not actually doing anything if members don't feel threatened – all members that is, not just those who feel threatened by the 'coalition's' exclusionary structure. Bauer and Wald (2000) suggest that coalitionism requires us to “give up any secure sense of self” (p. 1300) – that entering into coalition work requires a willingness to be in conflict, and to recognise one's own place as a contributor to that conflict. For white queer people this may involve being willing to accept a queer-identified space that is *not* homely – that is indeed rendered uncanny by the very fact of its queerness (Riggs 2003). In other words, and following a psychoanalytic interpretation of the homely/unhomely distinction, we may understand a queer space that actively renders visible and challenges racial privilege to be one in which white queer people can never truly feel 'at home', precisely because to feel as such would entail the imposition of uniformity and (white) hegemony that runs counter to coalition building. Thus as Wyatt (2004) suggests, sometimes to build community one must be willing to not feel at all communal, and not at all unified. To feel uneasy in a space where one would normally expect to feel at ease as a (typically unmarked white) queer person is to step into a space where race privilege may be acknowledged and engaged. To consider queer spaces as uncanny spaces – both for the unsettling they often produce in the broader context of a heteronormative society, and for the unsettling they may produce for queer people willing to acknowledge the disjunctures *between* varying queer communities – is to engage a notion of queerness that queers not only that which is other-to queer, but also that which is claimed as queer.

## Conclusions

In writing this paper for *Compass*, I have been mindful to introduce queer theory as a topic that will be new to some readers within the discipline of psychology, but which may also be very much familiar to others. As such, I have focused on a particular aspect of queer theory, namely its racial politics (Barnard 2003). In so doing I have outlined six interrelated areas requiring further attention from queer theorists and queer-identified people alike, and have signaled the places where psychology may contribute to these discussions. I hope similarly that the role of these points in the application of queer theorising within psychology will also be apparent – that the issues I have raised about queer theory, identities and coalitions will be taken as directly applicable to queer writing within psychology. Hopefully these points will raise important issues for those already working in the field, and will encourage those new to the field to read its seminal texts for what they perhaps do not mention.

In centring a commitment to exploring the racial politics of queer theory, particularly for those of us who identify as white, my intention has not been to engage in a form of moral appraisal of previous literature, nor to engage in marginalising the considerable gains made by queer theorists as to the hegemony of heteronormativity. As I suggested in the introduction, there exist several key readers (from within psychology and beyond) that highlight the role that queer theorising may play in psychological research. Likewise, my intention has not been to undermine the *importance* of the further development of a ‘queer psychology’, in

whatever forms it may take. Rather, my intention has been to further the call for accounts of a racialised heterosexual order that functions in complex ways to accord privilege through the operations of oppression. Thinking about racial privilege in the context of queer communities is challenging not only for its potential to break down such communities, but also for what some have suggested to me may provide the conservative Right with yet more ammunition against us. Whilst this is potentially true, I don't think it warrants turning away from issues of racial privilege or racism within queer communities. Rather, it requires us, and very much in the spirit of queer theory, to explore new ways of accounting for ourselves, and to do so in ways that are very much focused on interrogating taken-for-granted norms and their role in legitimating unequal social relations.

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## Biography

**Damien W. Riggs** is an ARC postdoctoral fellow in the School of Psychology, at the University of Adelaide, Australia. He is the National Convenor of the Australian Psychological Society's 'Gay and Lesbian Issues in Psychology' Interest Group and is the Editor of its *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review*. He has published in the areas of lesbian and gay psychology, critical race and whiteness studies, and parenting and family studies in journals such as *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society, Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology, Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review, Culture, Health and Sexuality, Sexualities, Australian Psychologist, Hypatia* and *International Journal of Critical Psychology*. He is the editor of two books: *Out in the antipodes: Australian and New Zealand perspectives on gay and lesbian issues in psychology* (with Gordon Walker, 2004, Brightfire Press), and *Taking up the Challenge: Critical race and whiteness studies in a postcolonising nation* (2007, Crawford Publishers). His last book, *Priscilla, (White) Queen of the Desert: Queer rights/race privilege* was published in 2006 by Peter Lang, and his latest book, entitled *Becoming Parent: Lesbians, gay men, and family*, was published in 2007 by Post Pressed. He is currently co-authoring a textbook (with Victoria Clarke, Sonja J. Ellis and Elizabeth Peel) entitled *LGBTQ Psychologies: Themes and perspectives* (Cambridge University Press).