

# **The Ground Upon Which We Stand: Teaching Sexuality *Through* Race**

**Damien W. Riggs**

## **Abstract**

In this paper I outline some of my own practices for teaching sexuality in tertiary education in Australia, and I suggest that one approach to teaching in this context requires non-indigenous educators to locate ourselves and our students within a relationship to ongoing histories of colonisation and the fact of Indigenous sovereignty. I also suggest that teaching about the intersections of multiple identity positions requires educators to incorporate specific pedagogies that render visible social norms, and which highlight the relationship between privilege and disadvantage. Finally, I outline the possible benefits of coming out in the classroom on multiple levels, and suggest that coming out as a white queer educator can assist in modelling forms of engagement for dominant group students that account for their social location.

**Keywords:** sexuality, privilege, Australia, pedagogy, Indigenous sovereignty

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## Introduction

Talking about teaching sexuality, as is the focus of this Special Issue, is an immensely important topic, and one that must necessarily invoke one's own pedagogy in regards to engaging with students. Furthermore, to write about teaching sexuality is potentially to write about one's own sexuality, and the ways in which living as a sexual subject shapes one's practice as an educator. Yet speaking solely of one's sexual subjectivity only tells one part of the story in relation to one's location in a range of social hierarchies. So, for example, if I am to start this paper by stating that I am a gay educator, I am only providing part of the picture. Broadening my focus to the identity categories that intersect with my sexuality would require me to state that I am (amongst other things) a white middle-class able-bodied gay educator. Bringing into view this particular configuration of subject positions demands of me as an educator and author a more complex account of my pedagogy, which I elaborate briefly in this paper.

The approach that I outline here, and which I reference in the second part of the title as teaching sexuality *through* race, is one informed by my commitment to educational practices within tertiary institutions that shift attention away from singular identity categories, and toward the multiple ways in which we are all positioned as individuals in a relation to social norms that are productive of either privilege or disadvantage. In other words, my emphasis is upon the ways in which some social identities may be accorded relative privilege (i.e., identifying as white in a society dominated by white people and our values and beliefs), whilst others may result in experiences of disadvantage (i.e., identifying as gay in heteronormative and at times homophobic

social contexts). Teaching sexuality *through* race is thus in part about reading identity categories in conjunction with one another, so as to avoid reductionist readings of sexuality that would position all non-heterosexual people as similarly disadvantaged, an approach that in my reading fails to see how some (white middle-class) non-heterosexual people experience considerable (racial and class) privilege at the same time as we experience marginalisation.

Teaching sexuality *through* race is necessarily context specific. Thus in this paper the examples I provide are about my teaching practice in Australia, a colonial nation founded upon claims to terra nullius (of the continent being an ‘empty land’), and the ensuing practices of dispossession and genocide that have shaped the Australian nation. Teaching sexuality *through* race in the Australian context thus requires me as an educator to always frame my teaching in a relationship to ongoing histories of colonisation, and to consider how to engage respectfully with the fact of Indigenous sovereignties. Recognising the ground upon which I stand as land that is ‘illegally possessed’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2003) requires me to find ways to first recognise the relationship I am in to the First Nations people upon whose land I live and teach, and second to find ways to encourage students (most of whom do not identify as Indigenous) to consider their own relationship to histories of colonisation (Nicoll, 2004).

Importantly, such an approach must be multi-faceted so as to avoid reducing the teaching of sexuality *through* race to a binary of Indigenous/white relations, and instead requires me to teach about the relationship that all non-indigenous Australians are in to histories of colonisation (after all, as non-indigenous people in Australia we

are all migrants), and at the same time to speak about the connections and disjunctures *between* non-indigenous people who are differentially positioned in relationship to a norm of white heterosexual middleclassness that variously accords social capital to differing groups of non-indigenous people in Australia.

### **A Day in an Australian Classroom**

At the beginning of any lecture series I acknowledge the sovereignty of the Kaurna people, the First Nations people upon whose land I live. Typically when I do this I will talk with the class about why I am doing this. Part of my reason for doing this is to make clear to students that this isn't about me being 'politically correct', nor is it about me being the 'thought police'. Rather, it is about respecting protocols that are established and endorsed by my University and by many institutions more broadly. Positioning an acknowledgment of country and sovereignty as a matter of due process, rather than as the well meaning intentions of a white academic, is an important aspect of rendering visible the relationship that non-indigenous people are in to histories of colonisation and the ongoing fact of Indigenous sovereignties in ways that are educational: it models a form of engagement that is less about 'white guilt' and more about responsibility.

When I am teaching a class, I will typically do so through the combined lenses of feminism, queer theory and critical race and whiteness studies. Read together, these differing views of the world afford me the scope to centre issues of power and

privilege, and to do so in ways that render visible the contingency of particular subject positions upon others (e.g., the fact that the corollary of the privilege that some groups experience is always the disadvantage of other groups). Feminism affords me the scope to look at power relations and to view them in their historical context. Queer theory takes up the feminist critique of binaries and power imbalances and examines the operations of heteronormativity in ways that, I believe, offers potential for educators to narrate ways back out of normative spaces. Of course in suggesting that I don't mean to infer that feminism doesn't offer spaces for reconstruction, nor that queer theory creates a space 'outside' of social norms. Rather, I think that when working with tertiary students, 'queer theory' as a category captures the attention of Australian students in ways that 'feminism' as a category sometimes doesn't (an unfortunate fact, but one I am nonetheless mindful of). Critical race and whiteness studies, with its emphasis upon racial privilege, affords me opportunities to talk about racial hierarchies in ways that move beyond simplistic accounts of racism (which typically serve to alienate dominant group students), and instead focuses on relationships and the connections between differing social locations.

Importantly, however, my use of these three frameworks is not a linear one, where feminism comes before queer theory which comes before critical race and whiteness studies. Rather, I use the three in conjunction with one another to elaborate the complex intersections of social hierarchies and power relations. So, for example, if I am teaching a topic on the lives of non-heterosexual people, I will be sure to encourage students to attend to the gender differences between LGBTQ people living in patriarchal societies; I will emphasise the populations from whom the research I cite is drawn (i.e., primarily white middle-class lesbians and gay men); and I will

draw attention, where possible, to the experiences of people who do not identify as falling within the categories of these ‘usual suspects’ (Clarke & Peel, 2007). When the research that I discuss in the classroom primarily focuses on white middle-class lesbians and gay men, I will try to do more than simply stating this by drawing any viable parallels with what the experiences of similar events might mean for other groups of LGBTQ people. A good example of this is provided by Pagenhart (1994):

Hate-crime statistics throw the complexity of identity into striking relief.

Not surprisingly, in the gay community it is white men who most often report hate crimes perpetrated against them. Because the number of their emergencies is smaller than that of many white lesbians, gay men of color, lesbians of color, they can be more certain that they are being bashed for being queer (p. 181).

Obviously Pagenhart is not suggesting here that it is a privilege for anyone to experience queer bashing. What she does suggest, however, is that to know so clearly that the victimisation one experiences is solely the result of one’s sexual identity (something that one may ‘choose’ to hide, though this of course should not have to be a necessary option) stands in direct contrast to experiences of violence that one may feel result from any number of identity positions, and which are potentially not so easy to hide. Locating the experiences of white middle-class lesbians and gay men both within the category ‘diversity’, and identifying how the experiences of this particular group are shaped by privilege and disadvantage relative to other groups of LGBTQ people, is an important facet of teaching sexuality *through* race (and, it may be argued, other identities such as class and ability).

Finally, in regards to teaching sexuality *through race*, I see considerable utility in coming out in the classroom. Whilst I acknowledge that coming out may not be a safe option for all educators, for myself it is a key tool in creating classroom environments that allow students to discuss their own identities and for non-indigenous students in particular to recognise their relationship to histories of colonisation and other hegemonies. My coming out in the classroom is often not just limited to speaking as a gay man, but can also at times involve speaking as a single parent, often as a white man, and as an educator willing to signal the power differentials between myself and students. Coming out through these various identities in the classroom not only locates my perspective as one of many, but allows me to talk about contested identities and topics in ways that model a form of ownership of privilege and social capital that can potentially be less threatening to students than asking them outrightly to do the same. My experience has been that students, through this process, often come to recognise and engage with their own relative privileges (here referring to dominant group students), and that they assess this as a strength of the classroom.

### **Conclusions: Safe and Unsafe Spaces**

Coming out as a queer educator brings with it a wide range of issues. But coming out as a queer white educator brings with it a responsibility not to let the former part of the identity descriptor ('queer educator') override the latter part ('white educator'). To identify as a white queer is to locate oneself within a *simultaneous* relationship to racial and sexual hierarchies (amongst others). The issue at heart, then, is not one of addition, where queer + white = a clear location within these hierarchies, Rather, to be

a *white queer* is to experience a sexual identity that is always already racialised, and more specifically, always already operates in a relationship to race privilege, and in colonial nations, in a relationship to both ongoing histories of colonisation and the fact of Indigenous sovereignty (Riggs, 2006).

Teaching sexuality *through* race thus requires creating both safe and unsafe spaces: spaces where it is (hopefully) relatively safe to explore a range of sexual identities and practices when teaching as a queer educator, but spaces where it must be unsafe to speak solely as a queer educator – where speaking simultaneously as a white queer educator is both necessary and difficult work.

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