
Benevolence, belonging and the repression of white violence

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Author statement

I affirm that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University library, being available for loan and photocopying

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Riggs', with a large, sweeping flourish extending from the end of the signature.

Damien W. Riggs

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Abstract

Research on racism in Australia by white psychologists is often fraught with tensions surrounding a) accounting for privilege, b) the depiction of particular racial minorities, and c) how individual acts of racism are understood. Nowhere is this more evident than in research that focuses on the relationship between Indigenous and white Australians. Such research, as this thesis will demonstrate, has at times failed to provide an account of the ongoing acts of racism that shape the discipline of psychology, and which thus inform how white psychologists in Australia write about Indigenous people. As a counter to this, I outline in this thesis an alternate approach to understanding racism in Australia, one that focuses on the ways in which racism is foundational to white subjectivities in Australia, and one that understands white violence against Indigenous people as an ongoing act. In order to explicate these points, and to examine what they mean in relation to white claims to belonging in Australia, I employ psychoanalytic concepts within a framework of critical psychology in order to develop an account of racism which, whilst drawing on the insights afforded by social constructionist approaches to racism and subjectivity, usefully extends such approaches in order to understand their import for examining racism in Australia. More specifically, I demonstrate how racism in Australia displays what Hook (2005) refers to as a 'psychic life of colonial power', one that implicates all people in histories of racism, and one that highlights the collective psychological nature of racism, rather than understanding it as an individual act. In the analyses that follow from this framework I demonstrate how white privilege and its corollary - the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty - are warranted by white Australians. To do this, I engage in a textual analysis of empirical data, focusing on both the everyday talk of white Australians as gathered via focus groups and a speech by Prime Minister Howard. In particular, I highlight how claims by white Australians to 'doing good' for Indigenous people (what I refer to as 'benevolence') may in fact be seen to evidence

one particular moment where the originary violence of colonisation is yet again played out in the name of the white nation. More specifically, and following Ahmed (2004), I suggest that claims to 'anti-racism' may be seen as 'non-performatives' – they do not require white Australians to actually challenge our unearned privilege, nor to examine how we are located within racialised networks of power. In contrast to this, I sketch out an approach to examining racism, both within the discipline of psychology and beyond, that is accountable for ongoing histories of colonial violence, which acknowledges the role that the discipline often continues to play in the legitimisation of race, and which is willing to address the relationship that white Australians are already in with Indigenous Australians.

Publication list

The contents of this thesis represent the culmination of a collection of papers published over the span of three years. The publications drawn upon are:

Riggs, D.W. (2004). Challenging the monoculturalism of psychology: Towards a more socially accountable pedagogy and practice. *Australian Psychologist*, 39, 110-126.

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Riggs, D.W. (2005). Cultures of denial: Managing the past, justifying the present. In T. Khoo (Ed.) *The body politic: Racialised political cultures in Australia*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland.

Riggs, D.W. (2006). 'What's love got to do with it?' Ambivalence and the national imaginary. *International Journal of Critical Psychology*, 16, 32-52.

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Preface

To speak of 'race relations' in Australia is a necessarily difficult task. It requires the speaker to elaborate many things, including where they speak from, what it means to speak from that position, how they understand 'race' itself as a category, what the implications are of any particular understanding of 'race', who they are being accountable to, and so forth. These multiple requirements can often lead those of us writing about race, and particularly those of us who identify as white, to engage in any number of actions, including, disavowing our own location, claiming some form of oppression for ourselves, refusing to engage with privilege, or writing in a way that presumes that what we 'know' about race is somehow more truthful or correct. Adrienne Rich (1996) has referred to this as 'white solipsism' – the belief not only that 'the self' is all we can know, but that white *selves* are all that *should* be known. Claims by white people to 'knowledge', or 'giving up power', or any number of the claims made in the name of 'anti-racism', can thus often serve to deny the complicity of those of us who identify as white with what may be understood as the epistemic and ontological violence that results from ongoing histories of colonisation.

By writing myself into these pages, and more specifically, by elaborating a situated understanding of colonisation in Australia *as a white person*, I hope to offer a reading of ongoing acts of colonial violence, and their relation to what I loosely refer to as 'anti-racism', that accounts for how white subjectivities are produced in Australia. In order to do this, I primarily focus on the relationship that exists in Australia between white people and Indigenous people. I realise that this is a somewhat problematic move, as it does not pay adequate attention to the relationship that all non-Indigenous Australians have to colonial histories, nor will my approach necessarily pay sufficient attention to the multiplicities of whiteness itself. An unfortunate by-product of any theorising of race is that certain aspects will be focused upon, whilst

others are left largely unmentioned. This, I believe, is perhaps in many ways a necessary outcome. The alternate would possibly be to theorise race in a totalising or universalising fashion, or to apply certain theories to encapsulate the experiences of all people living in a colonial nation such as Australia. I of course believe that there is a great need to theorise the multiple relationships that exist within Australia in regards to colonisation, and certainly to examine how multiple subject positions differentially locate all people in relation to the norm of white, middle-class, masculine heterosexuality (e.g., see Riggs, 2006). This is certainly something that I touch on throughout this body of work. Yet, at the same time, I am mindful of the limitations of my own claims to knowledge, and the privileges that I hold in speaking about Indigenous/white relations in Australia as a white person.

On that note, it is important to locate myself as a non-indigenous Australian – a white gay middle-class male – and to acknowledge that I live on the land of the Kurna people, the traditional owners of the land upon which Adelaide, South Australia, is located. In acknowledging the sovereignty of the Kurna people, I also draw attention to Fiona Nicoll's (2000) important statement that: "Indigenous sovereignty exists *because* I cannot know of what it consists; my epistemological artillery cannot penetrate it" (p. 370). Drawing from her work, I thus recognise that whilst I am always already in a relationship to Indigenous sovereignty, and that it indeed constitutes the ground upon which I write, my work can most honestly start by examining whiteness, rather than trying to account for what Indigenous sovereignty might be. As a result, whilst my theorising involves examining what Indigenous sovereignty *as a fact* means to white people in Australia, my interest lies not in claiming to know what that fact actually is, but rather to look at how it has been engaged with, refuted, or disavowed since colonisation.

The theoretical position that I outline, and my analysis of what I term the 'psychic life of colonial power' (see also Hook, 2004; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2005), is not, however, primarily a historical account wherein 'history' would be understood as the telling of 'what has already been'. Rather, my intention is to look at how the production of certain histories constitutes an ongoing effort to deny acts of white violence against Indigenous people, both in the past, the present, and the future.

In order to do justice to this approach, I elaborate an account of white subjectivities that draws upon psychoanalytic and critical psychological understandings of racism and subjectification. My use of psychoanalysis is not so as to diagnose white neuroses *per se*, but rather I use it as an interpretive tool for understanding how white subjectivities are always already shaped in a relationship to histories of colonising violence. In doing so, I seek to provide a means through which to understand the thoroughly social nature of racism, racial identification and white hegemony. Obviously this is an immense task, and one that this piece of work can only begin to contribute to. I do believe, however, that the framework that I will scaffold, and the analyses that will stem from it, will hold important insights into how racism and white privilege operate, and how such privilege is often deployed precisely at the moment when white people set out to 'do good'.

My reasons for using psychoanalytic concepts within a critical psychological framework are as follows. Critical psychology has long been produced through a conversation with psychoanalysis (e.g., Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn & Walkerdine, 1984). This is because the critical psychological project has largely involved developing an account of both how processes of subjectification function, and how certain subjectivities may be rendered intelligible as a result within particular discourses. This is a distinctly different project from that of either social psychology (which largely seeks to locate the individual within a social context) or discursive

psychology (which largely elaborates how people construct particular realities through talk). Critical psychology, in contrast, seeks to understand how subjectivities themselves are constructed in talk, and how particular subjectivities are available to us as a function of subjectification within Western societies. Moreover, a critical psychological approach that draws on psychoanalytic concepts seeks to look not only at how racialised subjectivities are constructed in talk, but also how talk serves as a screen that reflects back to us the broader social context. In this sense the approach I take is one that examines talk not for individual rhetoric *per se*, but rather for what that talk tells us about the context within which 'the individual' exists.

As I have already suggested, the critical psychological project has been usefully extended through an engagement with psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis may be broadly understood as offering an understanding of the individual that neither reduces subjectivity to discrete entities, nor focuses solely on the social or institutional. Rather, psychoanalysis provides us with an account of how particular subject positions are rendered intelligible within particular social contexts, and how such subject positions are thus constituted by, whilst simultaneously being constitutive of, these contexts (Elliot & Spezzano, 2000). In other words, not only are 'we' shaped by the social contexts within which we live, but the social context is constantly reconfigured, or more precisely *reiterated*, by the subjects who inhabit it. As a result, particular subject positions may be seen to reflect the operations of particular contexts: prohibitions on particular practices produces particular subjects, just as the reformulation of particular subject positions alters how power circulates in certain contexts. Psychoanalysis thus provides us with one window into the mutual effects of subjectivity and subjectification.

Such mutuality is one of the key features of this thesis. In regards to racism and race privilege, my interest is to elaborate how particular (white) subjects are rendered

intelligible within the context of a colonial nation, and from there to explore how this produces particular subjectivities *vis-à-vis* antiracism, race privilege and belonging (see also Cash, 2004). By first focusing on practices of subjectification in regards to racism, I create a space from which to view the implications of such practices for the everyday lives of white people in Australia. Whilst this may read in places as a rather deterministic account of racism, it is not one that precludes social change. Rather, my suggestion is that social change can only occur once white people are able to recognise how racial subjectification works, and how it produces white subjects who are always already invested in racism. Being accountable for this investment is not the same as being eternally thwarted when attempting to challenge racism and race privilege. Instead, it is to understand how any challenge to racism by white people is always produced in a relation to ongoing histories of colonising violence.

In order to elaborate these points, I use psychoanalysis through the lens of critical psychology in two distinct ways. First, I use psychoanalysis as a heuristic that I believe holds great explanatory power in regards to processes of subjectification. In this respect it affords us insights into white subjectivities that do not fall back on either the individual subject of mainstream psychology or the generalised subject that arises from more social accounts of racism. Psychoanalysis in this respect focuses on the inescapable relationship between the concepts of the individual and the social, and indeed it provides us with one means through which to challenge the very notion of this binary (Wetherell, 1999).

The second way in which I use psychoanalysis is as a metaphor for the commonplace ways in which we relate to one another. I do this because I believe that psychoanalysis holds a particularly strong foothold in Western societies in regards to how we talk about ourselves (see also Parker, 1997). It provides us with a language through which to talk about our experiences, and indeed through which our

very selves are produced. As such, certain psychoanalytic concepts may be seen as metaphors for how we live within Western societies. Using psychoanalysis in this sense, and particularly in tandem with the previous utilisation outlined above, remains true to the spirit of psychoanalytic inquiry, without necessarily reifying psychoanalytic concepts as true in an *a priori* sense. As a result, I use psychoanalysis both because it can help us to understand a great deal about racism and racial subjectification, and because it is intimately involved in the production of particular ways of understanding racism and subjectivities. Whilst these approaches to understanding racism and race privilege will often necessitate a number of complex theoretical moves in order to explicate the importance of grasping how colonial violence is implicated in the formation of white subjectivities, I believe this is integral to developing a critique of the potentially assimilatory aspects of anti-racism, and to working towards a more ethical engagement with Indigenous sovereignty on the part of white people such as myself.

My use of psychoanalysis in conjunction with critical psychology is extended through my engagement with the work of scholars in the field of critical race and whiteness studies (e.g., Hage, 1988; Haggis, 2005; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Nicoll, 2000). Work in this area has been at the forefront both in Australia and abroad in challenging how white hegemony is understood. Its main concern has not been to pay yet more attention to white subjectivities *per se*, but rather to understand how racism operates *through* the functioning of certain subjectivities – indeed how it differentially serves as a basis (either to oppress or privilege) for subjectivities in colonial nations such as Australia. Critical race and whiteness studies thus usefully build upon a psychoanalytic approach to the study of racism, which itself provides an account that exceeds that of the individualised focus of much of the psychological work on racism. Critical race and whiteness studies is centrally concerned with how white hegemony functions through institutions, how it informs everything from the law

to health care, from education to psychological knowledge. As such, the work of critical race and whiteness scholars serves as the overarching epistemological framework for this thesis, through which psychoanalytic and critical psychological tools serve as methods for understanding how whiteness functions at the level of the everyday.

Any critique of white privilege, and particularly one that includes a critique of white people's anti-racism, brings with it a great potential for hostility or resentment – indeed this is something that has often marked white responses to critical race and whiteness studies, both from within the media and academic mainstream (e.g., *The Weekend Australian*, 2003), and from within critical race and whiteness studies itself (e.g., Probyn, 2004). These everyday responses to critiques of whiteness is exemplified well by a comment that a white friend of mine made once in response to Indigenous activist Lilla Watson's (1992, p.1) well-known statement – “if you've come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let's work together”. My friend read this and stated that ‘comments like that will only offend people and stop them helping’. This to me is emblematic of how any challenge to notions of ‘white good’ (for which I henceforth use the term benevolence) is often taken as a threat to the perceived integrity of the image of a ‘good white nation’ and, by extension, white people ourselves. My interest in this thesis is thus to examine how it is that white hegemony is seemingly so easily unsettled, and to elaborate what this means about the uneasy relationship between white people and histories of white violence. By examining how critiques of whiteness are often resisted by white people, and by exploring how discourses of benevolence may often work to reassert white hegemony, I therefore seek not to attribute psychological meaning to such acts, where ‘psychology’ refers to an internal ‘state of mind’ held by a particular group of people. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate how the networks of power that circulate under colonialism in Australia demonstrate a

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particular 'psychic life' of their own – one that is foundational to the ways in which white Australians understand ourselves.

As will hopefully become clearer throughout the following introductory chapter, the present text can never be an answer or solution to how to be a better 'good white person'. Rather, and to again refer to the work of Fiona Nicoll (2004a), instead of seeking to 'solve racism' by being 'better' white people, it is important that those of us who identify as white recognise that the very belief in the 'goodness' of white people is foundational to practices of oppression in this country. What I call for here instead is not a 'black armband' account of colonisation, as Prime Minister Howard would have us believe, but rather a calling to account of how white privilege operates, and how it appears in places that to some (white) people may seem surprising, whilst to others may seem entirely commonplace and expected. To confront the multifarious nature of white violence in Australia is thus to be willing (for those of us who identify as white) to be rendered uncomfortable in the face of complicity, and to engage with, rather than refute, our own locations.