

which some scholars use late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century sexological and psychoanalytic binaries to shape their accounts of the past. Haggerty's extensive treatment of gothic literary and cinematic texts presents a valuable archive of cultural materials for more-nuanced historical work on sexuality, a contribution that makes *Queer Gothic* important reading for literary critics and historians of sexuality alike.

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## THE LIMIT OF QUEER THEORY

**Iain Morland**

*Priscilla, (White) Queen of the Desert: Queer Rights/Race Privilege*

Damien W. Riggs

New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

xx + 126 pp.

Damien W. Riggs seeks successfully to “contribute to the queering of white privilege itself, but also to an interrogation of *white queer privilege*—something that queer rights campaigns on the whole have most often failed to do” (4). In redressing this, he makes an original contribution to debates about sexual, racial, and national identity in a range of disciplines. Riggs draws a correct contrast between “much queer rights rhetoric, which often accepts the framework of liberal individualism,” and his proposal that “rights advocacy may constitute a critique of the very notion of state sanction itself” (107). In this divergence from canonical queer theory, his book's title is rather a misnomer: although Riggs's arguments are germane to queer rights, they are not classically queer arguments to the extent that they apply readily to lesbian and gay rights, too. This elides some tensions

between queer theory and lesbian and gay studies, but nevertheless makes Riggs's book pertinent to sexuality studies beyond queer theory.

The author summarizes accurately his trajectory as "(a) an elaboration of why it is that researching simultaneous identities seems at first to be difficult, (b) an examination of how particular identity claims privilege particular white queer accounts of subjectivity, (c) an interrogation of what it means to identify as white in a colonial nation such as Australia, and (d) an engagement with Indigenous critiques of white privilege" (110). The readings of the film from which the book takes its title are relevant but brief; this is not a film studies book. Nonetheless, the author is a sensitive close reader. Analyzing the maiden parliamentary speech by Pauline Hanson, founder of Australia's conservative One Nation party and self-styled white victim of "reverse racism" (37), Riggs comments cogently that "at the very moment where white people claim to feel disenfranchised, they do so from a position of power and privilege" (38–39). Riggs also performs deft readings in chapter 4, notably of the *Let's Get Equal* campaign literature, which promotes "equal rights for same sex couples" in South Australia (66). His close reading in chapter 5 of the queer parenting slogan "love makes a family" is similarly astute in its revelation of love's discursive ambivalence and its consequently uncertain political utility.

The book is valuable too for its lucid reference to a range of Judith Butler's texts (e.g., 89, 101–3, 108), instead of the reiteration of her early work that has characterized much academic queer theory. But I was disappointed that Riggs does not discuss Richard Dyer's seminal *White*.<sup>1</sup> Another minor irritation is that the book lacks an index.

Significantly, Riggs identifies implicitly the limit of queer theory. "When those of us who identify as white speak out in regards to rights, and assert that we are entitled to do so, we draw upon our privilege as white people living in a society that accords us significant social status, *regardless of our sexuality*" (71). Put differently, it is the social constitution of one's whiteness that in certain situations renders one's sexuality irrelevant. Concomitantly, queer theory, understood as a story of sexual dissidence, becomes redundant. And queer theory's redundancy is specifically a moral failure rather than a lapse in the theoretical project of describing identities: there are "moral implications," Riggs states, that arise "from claims to equality that do not interrogate racism and race privilege" (66). He therefore rejects Marilyn Frye's formulation of ethics as primarily pragmatic in its context-dependence (70), arguing instead for critical reflexivity as a foundational effort for any ethics (71). "By examining our own moral claims, and by looking at what we can bring to a coalition with Indigenous people, those of us who identify as white queers may more reflexively engage with multiple *simultaneous* axes of privilege

and oppression, rather than simply focusing on our sexuality” (73). This is an important challenge: queer theorists who read Riggs will need to account for his morally persuasive refusal to focus on sexuality.

By carefully avoiding ontological generalizations about identity (chapters 2 and 3), moral goodness (chapter 4), and love (chapter 5) in favor of a refocusing on the “social accountability” of “rights discourse” (106), Riggs successfully advances “an understanding of queer *in conjunction with privilege*” without “claim[ing] the moral high ground” (110) on his topic. To this end, he argues for “rights claims . . . made not to secure sanction for individual white queers *per se*, but rather to challenge the very process of state sanction itself” (109). I find Riggs’s proposal convincing, but some readers will find the book’s tone overcautious and may prefer more substantive suggestions for morally correct social policies.

Because the volume is relatively slim, and contains only one footnote, I was concerned initially that it might lack detail. However, its brevity is a strength, making the book accessible beyond sexuality studies to multidisciplinary audiences in cultural studies, critical psychology, postcolonial studies, and social theory. It will shape scholarship on Australian sexual and racial politics. For example, Riggs’s account of the white denial of Indigenous sovereignty (97) could informatively be situated alongside an analysis of Australia’s relationship to Britishness, to consider how the latter relationship is differently denied and affirmed.

In future work, it would be interesting to see Riggs elaborate on Frantz Fanon’s “epidermalisation” (100) to present a phenomenological account of being reflexively white within a “postcolonialising” (2) context. My sense after reading this book is that for those who refuse white privilege, such a phenomenology would be a matter of shame.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps queerness and whiteness are incommensurable not simply because sexuality and race are irreducibly different but because queerness may be a source of pride, whereas whiteness, constituted by its history of violence, is necessarily shameful.

## Notes

1. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).
2. For example, Elspeth Probyn, “Shame in the Habitus,” *Sociological Review* 52 (2004): 224–48.

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