

EDITORIAL: 'QUEER RACE'¹

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I am very pleased to have been able to edit and now present this special issue of the *ACRAWSA e-journal* on the topic of 'Queer Race'. The impetus for putting this issue together came from my own work within the field of critical race and whiteness studies, which has most recently focused on examining queer identities as simultaneously sexed, raced and gendered, with a particular focus on how those of us who identify as white queer people are holders of race privilege that sits alongside our experiences of oppression on the basis of sexuality (Riggs 2006).

This research has drawn on a long tradition of work that examines what may be broadly termed 'queer race', and which has looked at topics as wide-spread as the privileges held by white queer people (Bernard 2003; Hutchinson 2000), the limitations of rights movements that privilege the experiences of white queers (Nast 2002; Saalfeld & Navarro 1991), the ways in which queer identities challenge hegemonic national identities (Nicoll 2001), the whiteness of queer theory itself (Martinez 2003), intersections of (post)colonialism and sexuality (Hawley 2001; Patton & Sanchez-Eppler 2000), globalisation and queer identities (Cruz, Manalansan & Cruz-Malave 2002), alongside a broad range of research that has focused on the sexual, gender, and racial identities of specific groups (e.g., Eng and Hom 1998; Munoz 1999; Sommerville 2000). Importantly, this literature draws from as diverse fields as legal studies, psychology, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, gender and queer studies and beyond. This multidisciplinary approach is, I would suggest, central to any attempt at engaging with how race, gender and sexuality are played out in conjunction

with one another, as it is in multiple ways that norms around sexuality, gender and race are played out and perpetuated.

As may be seen from this brief summary of a selection of research in the area of 'queer race', the literature is both broad ranging, and has continued to grow since the early 1990s. Indeed, I would suggest that this literature actually developed from critiques within feminism of the whiteness of feminism itself, and the problems with focusing on single-axis analyses of oppression (e.g., hooks 1992; Hull, Scott and Smith 1982; Moreton-Robinson 2000). Recognising the legacy of this and other traditions of critiquing the potential privileges held by certain marginalised groups is also something that I believe to be central to developing the literature on 'queer race'. Otherwise there is a risk that those of us working in the area will fail to acknowledge the voices that precede us, voices upon which many of us may unknowingly base both our rights claims and our research agendas.

In many different ways the papers in this special issue build upon the legacies of the previous research I have mentioned above, whilst drawing out important and exciting new directions for examinations of 'queer race'. The authors draw upon a wide range of techniques and theoretical approaches, from literary analysis (both Birns and McCormack) to media studies (Laforteza) to autoethnography (both Caluya and Han). Importantly, the papers demonstrate a breadth of focus on the topic of queer race that falls much wider than simply on the experience of white lesbians and gay men. Hence both Han and Caluya elaborate gay Asian men's experiences of racism,

whilst Birns explores trans perspectives within the work of Larissa Lai. Laforteza examines the privileges held by white queer men and white transwomen, and compares these to the representations of Asian women and the stereotype of the 'mail order bride', whilst McCormack provides an account of familial relations amongst diasporic and sexually diverse queer men and women through her examination of the work of Shani Mootoo.

What the papers in this issue remind us is that identity categories always fail to adequately capture the multiple ways we are identified as variously racialised, gendered and sexualised beings. McCormack describes this best in her paper by drawing upon the work of Butler (2004) to elaborate the ways in which our identities are formed through our relationships with others – we come to see ourselves as individuals in possession of coherent narratives as a result of the stories that we tell one another – stories that are constructed not by individuals, but which rather are themselves constructive of any sense of individuality. Whilst it may well be threatening at times to consider one's sense of self to be intimately connected to the people who we share our lives with, and the social contexts within which we do this, McCormack suggests that an understanding of the intersubjective nature of identity produces a 'hopeful potential' through which change and transgression may occur in the face of hegemony. Importantly, McCormack suggests that "as connections are forming they are also always being critiqued, not to undermine their political potential or necessity but rather to avoid the reiteration of violence, insofar as one group's safety and/or norms can often be another's violences".

I take this notion of the intimate relationship between social change and critique as central to the elaboration of 'queer race'. What it suggests to me is that those of us working in the field must always be mindful that one person's (or one group's) political ambitions or desires may sit in conflict with another's. One particular example of this took place in the form of the Millennium March, an event held in Washington in 2000. In an interview between Kim Diehl and Barbara Smith (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. In the interview 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.

An understanding of identities as thoroughly social practices may afford us an understanding of queer race that is able to manage the juxtapositions of privilege and oppression within queer communities so as not to apportion blame or discount experiences of oppression, but rather to develop means of accountability that acknowledge the fundamental connections that shape all of our lives in societies that are

simultaneously founded upon racialised, sexualised and gendered hierarchies (amongst others). To think of a 'white heteropatriarchy' (Riggs 2005), for example, whilst presenting a challenge to any account of identity, may nonetheless expand our accounts of 'queer race' from ones that focus on identities as 'problems of addition' (Harris 1995), to ones that explore the multiplicities of queer identifications.

Finally, and in relation to ACRAWA's identity as an *Australian* organisation, it is important to reiterate that analyses of inter-racial queer politics in colonial nations are always already shaped through the relationship that non-indigenous people are in with Indigenous peoples (Nicoll 2004). Acknowledging that discussions of 'queer race' in Australia occur upon land illegally possessed is a starting place that is often overlooked within queer rights campaigns, but which is fundamental to the ways in which certain groups of people are granted access to rights in Australia that come as a result of colonisation.

I, along with the authors of the papers in this issue, hope that the topic of 'queer race' will continue to stimulate much discussion amongst scholars, activists and community members alike, and that this will contribute to the development of radical and transformative accounts of what it means to identify as a queer person in a global context.

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Notes

¹ I am indebted to Ian Barnard (2003) for his conceptualisation of the term 'queer race' and would direct the reader to his text and the review of it included in this issue. I would also like to acknowledge here the sovereignty of the Kaurna people, the First Nations people upon whose land I live in Adelaide, South Australia.