

FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE? THE POLITICS OF VOICE, WHITE PRIVILEGE AND THE ETHICS OF RESEARCH

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Response

In the last issue of this journal (2008, 4(1)) Damien Riggs criticised my work (2000a; 2001) on non-Aboriginal adoptive/foster mothers of Aboriginal children in his article 'White mothers, Indigenous families and the politics of voice'. Riggs raises some challenging issues around the politics of voice and the privileging of whiteness that go beyond my now dated case-studies, and have implications for all researchers concerned with critical race issues. I use the opportunity provided by the editors to enlarge the critical space (re-) opened by Riggs and to address some key points related to my own work and some considerations which have bearings on the ethics of research.

It is useful to provide a brief background to the research which may go some way to addressing Riggs' concerns with its design and methodology. In 1996, in the final stages of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's inquiry into the forced removal of Indigenous children (1997), I began work on the same subject. Scrupulously—I now consider it, over-scrupulously—I sought a point of entry into this field which would not, as I saw it then, encroach on, or compromise, the primacy and authority of Aboriginal voices/ experience on the issue of Indigenous child removal and its consequences. I was certainly well-versed in one version of the 'politics of voice' via the terms formulated in the Bell-Huggins et al debate (Bell and Nelson, 1989; Huggins et al 1991), and considered then that certain areas of

inquiry were properly not my 'business' as a white researcher. In this and some other respects, this research is the product of a particular historical moment. Riggs criticises the partiality of my research design on this point: why didn't I speak to Aboriginal mothers? Why did I not also speak to stolen children? For the reasons outlined here, I ruled out as inappropriate for me research with stolen children or their families. The research was designed specifically as a critical inquiry into white experience for the insight it might bring to our understanding of non-Indigenous complicity in Indigenous child removal. As a consequence of this, the research is partial (as indeed all research is) as Riggs correctly notes.

Thus willingly constrained, I continued to work on Indigenous child removal and on the national assimilation project as it took shape in the period after the Second World War. The question of the white women who adopted and fostered Aboriginal children during these years—on which I had seen no research—emerged. Here, it seemed, was a way in which I could contribute to knowledge on this chapter in Indigenous-settler relations within the ethical research parameters I had set. Through the subject of the white women who adopted/fostered Indigenous children, I saw a way in which I might combine my commitment to Indigenous issues with my commitment to feminist inquiry, while observing the principle of not attempting to speak for, or on behalf of, Indigenous peoples. I hoped that this inquiry might shed some light on the

ways in which the national project of Indigenous assimilation played out in the private spaces of non-Indigenous families (drawing on the child-rearing labour of white women to do the job of assimilation on behalf of the state) following provocative leads from Deborah Bird Rose who writes that the violence of colonisation impacts on both colonised and coloniser and that this impact may also be seen to be gendered in its effect (1996; 1997; Cuthbert 2000). Riggs finds the resultant research objectionable and generative of firstly, what he sees as my uncritical enshrining of white privilege and, secondly, the perpetuation of violence against Indigenous people, which is the main focus of his essay.

I no longer adhere strictly to the scruples which then prevented me from embarking on a research design which incorporated both black and white experience but my reasons for revising this position are less aligned to the critical points raised by Riggs and much closer to the reasoning outlined by David Hollinsworth (1995). He argues that a regime in which Aboriginal 'speech' is only deemed possible in the face of white 'silence' results in compromised speech wrested from racist paternalism, existing in an 'epistemological no-go zone' which is antithetical both to good scholarship and to a thorough-going anti-colonial and anti-racist political project. I remain open on the 'politics of voice'. Due to my own on-going difficulties in settling this question to my satisfaction, when approaching the work of others, I do so in full awareness of the enormous personal, ethical and political challenges entailed in work of this kind; and the very uncomfortable space researchers, particularly white researchers as noted by Riggs, occupy when researching and writing on whiteness and race in the settler-colonial situation.

Riggs' second concern with my research design and methodology—that the exclusive focus on white experience bespeaks and perpetuates white privilege and colonial violence—is an extremely difficult point to negotiate, as he acknowledges. To the many points made by Riggs, I add this consideration: it is hard to know how white privilege might be critically analysed and examined unless it is critically analysed and examined. It is hard to know how this might be done other than by listening to white voices, reading white words, analysing white legislation, examining white media representations, and so forth. While acknowledging that this work is difficult, deeply uncomfortable, potentially compromised and compromising, and when undertaken by white academics bound to perpetuate white privilege at some level, it is necessary to allow for some critical space in which work of this kind can be pursued. By the very reason of its hegemonic status, white privilege continues to demand critical attention. Foregrounding white experience precisely so that racism and white privilege might be examined and understood is not logically equivalent to foregrounding white experience so as further to enshrine white privilege, power and violence. If it were, there would be little or no room for the sustained critical analysis these issues so patently call for. Arguably, the risks in not doing work of this kind outweigh those entailed in undertaking it: partial, flawed, provisional though it might be. We all need to work, and support each others' efforts, to find, maintain and defend the discursive and institutional space for this work to continue. Make no mistake, there are others who would seek to shut it down (see, for example, @ndy, 2008 and Richardson, 2007).

One remedy posited by Riggs against the perpetuation of colonial violence

which he sees enacted in giving space to the voices of non-Aboriginal adoptive/foster mothers to be heard, is to leave the voices of these women 'unspoken'. Some voices, Riggs argues, are so inherently violent and so objectionable, that they should not be spoken at all. Riggs' position may be responded to in a number of ways, which time and space prevent. I make only the following points. Truth and reconciliation commissions are built on dialogue and reciprocity that include not only the voices of those injured but also those who perpetrated those injuries. To shut out some voices is to render such efforts futile. Further, while familiar with the work of Frankenberg (Cuthbert, 2000a) and others in the (then) emerging field of whiteness studies, my empirical research with white women readily confirmed that white privilege is not a monolith. Different whites are positioned differently in relation to whiteness; race intersects with gender and class in complex ways. Listening to the stories of these women—most painful, all complex, some surprising and others offensive—confirmed the need for a variegated response to, and theorisation of, whiteness (just as it sorely challenged certain feminist precepts about research with women).

Further, the politics of colonialism played out very differently in the lives of different women. Some of the white women were actively complicit in the assimilation project and this led them to seek out Indigenous children for adoption; others adopted Indigenous children simply because they became available at the time they sought to adopt; and others still had no idea the child/ren they adopted were Indigenous. The politics enacted in the lives of these women ranged from complicity with to resistance against the then dominant regime of assimilation.

We can only understand this by listening to and analysing their stories. As researchers, this is our ethical responsibility.

In research on colonisation which is directed towards thorough de-colonisation and social justice we will not get far enough if we only listen to one side of the story, or as Riggs suggests, exclude certain voices from our research. Understanding is a necessary pre-condition for countering and dismantling the deep, persistent and, at times very subtle, cultural and political logic of colonialism and racism. We need to be highly attuned to and prepared to research, critically analyse and report all voices and all experiences as they bear on the past and present of Indigenous-settler relations in this country, and the myriad injustices which flow from the inequities structured into these relationships.

If we as scholars and researchers—even for a minute, even with the best intentions in the world—allow ourselves to subscribe to the vision of politically-engaged research posited by Riggs, in which some voices are silenced or excluded from scrutiny and analysis (and we might ask, excluded by whom?), we may well find ourselves in a place which is very different from that for which we are striving; and, perhaps, not all that different from the places, dark and fearful, to which we seek never to return.

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