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## Reading Interrelationality: The Racial Politics of Academic Research

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In June 2007, and in the name of Indigenous children, then Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced that he would be moving military troops into the Northern Territory to combat the allegedly high rates of child abuse in remote Indigenous communities. In order to make this invasion possible, Howard passed legislation revoking the permit system, which had previously authorized Indigenous control of access to lands, and asserted government control over Indigenous lands for a period of 5 years. As Rebecca Stringer has argued, claims to be acting in the best interests of Indigenous children were thus a smoke screen for neocolonial violence to be enacted at individual and legislative levels against Indigenous communities.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the November 2007 election saw Howard voted out of power, the legislation controlling the sovereignty of Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory is still very much in place.

At approximately the same time as Howard announced his 'intervention', email lists to which I subscribe saw members of Australian queer parenting communities express concern about mooted legislation that would prevent queer people from undertaking transnational adoptions. Like myself, many of the members of these email lists identify as white queer people, and I could not help but feel concerned when reading these posts that some of the white queer parents or parents-to-be were failing to locate their rights claims in a relationship not only to the denial of Indigenous sovereignty on the part of the white nation, but also the voices of transnational adoptees who are increasingly speaking of the effects of the global commodification of children placed for adoption.

In this commentary I focus on one of the specific implications that I see arising from the often conflicting rights claims of white queers, transnational adoptees and Indigenous communities: namely, the differing ways in which research outcomes are put to use to purportedly 'support' these groups of people. In so doing, I highlight the racial politics of research on families and parenting, and I examine the intersections of privilege and oppression as they play out through both research agendas and in the lives of individual groups of people. My concern is centrally with the ways in which academic research has at times been of benefit to white queers, and certain white queers in particular, and how these benefits arise precisely from the aspects of white knowledge claims that overwrite Indigenous sovereignties, or which fail to acknowledge their location within global economies of privilege and oppression. In this sense, and without undermining the discrimination faced by white queers, I highlight the racial politics of (predominantly) white queer rights claims, and locate them within a relationship to the rights claims of other marginalized groups.

### The (Mis)Uses of Research

In a paper discussing the report that precipitated the Northern Territory invasion, Ernest Hunter highlights how much of the research that the authors of the report relied upon focused on child abuse amongst non-indigenous communities.<sup>2</sup> As Hunter suggests, this is perhaps understandable as there is so little research (or at least research that is recognized as such by the academy, as I will elaborate later) that focuses on Indigenous communities. Yet it is important to question how it is that research conducted with non-indigenous communities becomes the norm against which Indigenous communities are measured. Certainly it is nothing new to suggest that research agendas in Australia and abroad have historically functioned to marginalize and pathologize Indigenous people. My concern here, however, goes further than recognizing the ways in which academic research fails to adequately represent Indigenous communities, and extends to ask the question of whether non-indigenous academic research can ever actually represent Indigenous communities. If we are to understand much academic research as framed by white values, norms and forms of knowledge making, then it is legitimate to ask whether this framework has any relevance to the experiences of Indigenous communities.

Similar questions have been asked by transnational adoptees, who have questioned how research conducted by non-adoptees focusing on the life outcomes of people who are adopted can adequately

capture the experiences of adoptees, particularly when such research is reliant upon the logic of assimilation to assess 'successful life outcomes'. As Kirsten Hoo-Mi Sloth suggests, research on transnational adoption typically takes as its starting place the assumption that a 'successful adoption' results in the adoptee identifying solely with their adoptive parents, and in so doing rejecting or ignoring their birth parents and culture.<sup>3</sup> By this logic, any person who is adopted who wishes to learn about their birth families or culture is constructed as a 'failed adoptee'. Yet, as research by transnational adoptees continues to demonstrate, engaging with and exploring histories of adoption plays an important, if not central, role in developing a sense of self that spans families of origin and families of upbringing.

These issues in regards to research on Indigenous communities and transnational adoption point towards some of the fundamental problems that exist when attempting to apply the logic of universalism to the specific experiences of those people who do not automatically fit within or indeed adhere to the worldview promoted by white academic research. Kirsten Hoo-Mi Sloth again suggests in this regard that part of the problem is the search within much academic research for singular answers or identities. In contrast, she suggests that many transnational adoptees inhabit a range of locations and identities that result from their engagement with varying forms of family and differing cultures. Indigo Williams Willing suggests that what is required is the 'representation of the transracial adoption experience by transracial adoptees ... It is time to view transracial adoptees as expert documenters of their own lives, not just as informants for other writers and researchers to use as decoration to authorise their own views'.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, Williams Willing highlights the voices of transnational adoptees, but reminds us that this should not result in the construction of an essentialized 'transnational adoptee' identity category, but rather that there will be multiple stories told from multiple positions.

Recognition that claims to universality do not hold out has often necessarily been underpinned by a critique of essentialism, and the ways in which it is used to warrant particular identity claims or to justify particular research findings. Yet, as Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson suggests, critiques of essentialism are more accurately critiques of the essentialist ways in which white western knowledge claims are misapplied to non-white people and cultures.<sup>5</sup> This distinction is important, as while it is appropriate for claims to essentialism that operate in the service of colonization to be subjected to scrutiny, it is not appropriate for identity claims by Indigenous people that may be read as essentialist to be subjected to the same scrutiny. As Moreton-Robinson suggests, Indigenous claims to an ontological relationship to country, and the fact of sovereignty being carried by Indigenous people through their embodiment, is not equitable to white claims to essential differences between white and Indigenous people (claims that were used to justify colonization on the basis of the presumed inferiority of Indigenous people). Rather, Indigenous knowledge claims exceed white knowledge claims – the two are incommensurable in their histories and particular contexts.

Drawing attention to the limitations of critiques of essentialism brings me necessarily to research on queer, and more specifically lesbian and gay parenting. There now exists a substantial body of research on lesbian and gay parenting, and this continues to be used to advocate for the rights of queer parents more broadly. Yet, if we are to examine this body of research more closely, it quickly becomes apparent that the vast majority of it focuses on the experiences of white, middle-class, coupled lesbian mothers.<sup>6</sup> While this particular group of people have historically required considerable support in maintaining custody of their children in the context of heterosexist and homophobic societies, it is nonetheless important to question how the emphasis upon white queer parents within academic research again perpetuates both the norm of whiteness, and the exclusion of a diverse range of parenting practices. Not only does this emphasis upon white middle-class coupled lesbian parents fail to engage with the experiences of non-white queer parents, but it also establishes a research base that, as a result of its almost exclusive focus upon one particular group of queer parents, could potentially be used against other groups of queer parents. In other words, it is not inconceivable that a court of law could use the body of research on white middle-class coupled lesbian mothers to argue against the rights of single white working class lesbian mothers, or coupled gay middle-class Indigenous fathers (for example). As much as this research explicitly supports the parenting of one group of parents, it implicitly fails to sanction the parenting of other groups of parents. In this sense, it is important to examine the ways in which particular bodies of research, whilst being of benefit to some people, may actually stand in the way of the rights of other people.

Finally, and to return to the report that was misused by the Howard government to justify the Northern Territory invasion, it is not only the case that research on non-Indigenous families is often misapplied to Indigenous families, but it is also the case that only particular forms of research are considered legitimate. In contrast to the research on lesbian and gay parenting, which on the whole typically adopts a very

normative model of scientific empirical research, research conducted by and for Indigenous communities often challenges this model, and as a result, its findings are often marginalized. My point here is thus that research on Indigenous communities may not necessarily be as scarce as is often presumed. Rather, it is what we count as research that renders invisible the existence of knowledge about Indigenous communities. That one particular report could be so actively misused by the Howard government signifies not only its willful engagement in neocolonialism, but also its prioritizing of particular voices over others. That Indigenous communities were not consulted as a starting place for any 'intervention' signals the fact that it is not only research agendas that are driven by white knowledge claims, but it is also the whiteness of the recipient of the research that shapes which knowledges will be privileged. When white norms and values shape our views on what counts as truthful or morally upstanding, the voices of marginalized groups of people, such as Indigenous communities and transnational adoptees, are further marginalized. That these groups of people continue to resist marginalization and assert the legitimacy of their own claims to knowledge signals the limits of whiteness as hegemony and thus highlights the point at which white claims to truth break down.

### Conclusions

In this commentary I have sought to draw out some of the complex interrelationships between Indigenous communities, white queer people, and the children they seek to adopt. In so doing, I have highlighted how the rights claims of white queers are often supported by research framed by particular (white) ways of knowing, and that this stands in direct contrast to research conducted by white academics that has at times been used against Indigenous communities and transnational adoptees (amongst others). While there are of course white researchers who also campaign against the rights of queer people, the legacies of colonization and the commodification of children in a global context means that white queer people are increasingly likely in the Western world to have at least some degree of sanction by the state (at the very least on the basis of their whiteness), while Indigenous people (for example) continue to be subject to regressive, neocolonial legislation.

Placing the rights of the three groups that I focus on in this paper in a relationship to one another is thus an important strategic move. It refuses to see the three groups as separate, and instead emphasizes the contingency of the rights that white queers have (as white Australians) upon the denial of Indigenous sovereignty, and places the desire of some white queers to engage in transnational adoption in a relationship to global economies of exchange in which discourses of 'children's rights' often serve as a smokescreen for the rights of the white nation. Considering how those of us who identify as white queers stand to benefit from neocolonial practices thus does not undermine speaking of the discrimination that we face living in heterosexist and homophobic societies, but rather it places this discrimination in a relationship to the privileges that we hold as white people. Being accountable for this must entail not only the diversification of research agendas so as to include a broader range of people, but also to recognize and examine the racial politics of research agendas, and the ends to which academic research is put in the service of neocolonialisms.

### Notes

1. [Stringer, R. \(2007\) 'A nightmare of the neocolonial kind: Politics of suffering in Howard's Northern Territory intervention', \*Borderlands e-journal\*, 6](#). Accessed November 15, 2007 [□]
2. Hunter, E. (2007) ' "Little children" and big sticks'. In J. Altman & M. Hinkson (eds.) *Coercive reconciliation: Stabilise, normalise, exit Aboriginal Australia* (pp. 121-131). North Carlton: Arena Publications [□]
3. Hoo-Mi Sloth, K. (2006) 'Researching adoption: Whose perspective and what issues?', in J. Jeong Trenka, J. Chinyere Oparah & S. Yung Shin (eds.) *Outsiders within: Writing on transnational adoption*. (pp. 253-258). Boston: South End Press [□]
4. Williams Willing, I. (2006) 'Beyond the Vietnam war adoptions: Representing our transracial lives', in J. Jeong Trenka, J. Chinyere Oparah & S. Yung Shin (eds.) *Outsiders within: Writing on transnational adoption*. (pp. 259-266). Boston: South End Press [□]
5. Moreton-Robinson, A. (2003) 'I still call Australia home: Indigenous belonging and place in a white postcolonizing society', in Ahmed, S., Castañeda, C., Fortier, A. & Sheller, M. (eds.) *Uprootings/regroundings: Questions of home and migration*. Oxford: Berg [□]
6. [Riggs, D.W. \(2007\) 'On being "acceptable": State sanction, race privilege, and lesbian and gay parents'. \*Reconstruction: Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies Journal\*, 7](#). Retrieved November 29, 2007 [□]

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