

WHITE MOTHERS, INDIGENOUS FAMILIES, AND THE POLITICS OF VOICE

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Abstract

Ongoing histories of genocide, dispossession and child removal continue to shape the Australian nation. Speaking of such histories is fraught with racial power differentials that dictate which particular voices will be given space within public discourse. Examining how a 'politics of voice' is deployed within the writings of white academics is one important site for better understanding how it is that white voices continue to occupy a hegemonic position within the Australian academy and in everyday talk. In this paper I examine how particular representations of white foster/adoptive mothers of Indigenous children in Australia highlight the problematic nature of research seeking to represent experiences classified as previously 'unspoken'. In examining the work of one particular white Australian academic I suggest that it is important that white academics engage in research practices that highlight, rather than overlook, matters of race privilege and which ground white people in histories of colonisation and in a relationship to the fact of Indigenous sovereignty.

Introduction

The centrality of 'voice' continues to be an organising principle in much feminist research seeking to elaborate the impact of patriarchy upon women's lives. Increasingly, however, attention

has been paid to the politics of voice. Particularly within feminist politics, issues continue to be raised concerning the problems associated with particular women speaking *for* other women, and the implications of this in the context of nations formed through colonisation (e.g. Moreton-Robinson 2000). Moreover, the ways in which *white* women's voices continue to be prioritised within feminist research has been rendered visible as an enactment of racial privilege that highlights the investment that white people have in maintaining the unequal distributions of racialised power that circulate through academia (Moreton-Robinson, 2003). The act of speaking is thus increasingly recognised as one that is inextricably linked to issues of power, and is one aspect of feminist theorising that requires continued attention.

In this paper I take up the problematic of voice by engaging with recent Australian feminist work by Ravenscroft (2003), in which she provides a much needed framework for understanding how it is that white Australians always already speak in a relationship to colonisation, and how the speech of those of us who identify as white thus often functions as a form of violence. Whilst locating instances of such violence may be a relatively straightforward act if the white person under scrutiny identifies as a member of a right-wing political group (for example), it is often somewhat harder to examine how violence is enacted when the voices under examination are those

represented as 'doing good' (see Riggs, 2004, for more on this).

In her work, Ravenscroft (2003) examines the writing of Kathleen Mary Fallon (2002), a white foster mother of an Indigenous boy (now adult).¹ Ravenscroft, through her engagement with Fallon's work, elaborates an account of the difficulties of speaking as a white subject who is clearly marked as inhabiting a relationship to colonial violence: as Ravenscroft suggests, Fallon stands as "the scapegoat for a nation's guilt for the stolen children" (237). Importantly, both Ravenscroft and Fallon (writing as white women) attempt to explore what it means for particular histories to be (un)spoken: how some histories are unspeakable, and how others should potentially *not* be spoken, or at least not spoken in ways that are likely to enact further violence.

Ravenscroft (2003) thus calls for "a reading practice that allows this unutterable to stand" (235), and it is in response to this call that I write within this paper. In doing so I take up the (necessarily difficult) task of being a white male engaging with the voices of a group of white foster/adoptive mothers of Indigenous children, or more precisely, with how their voices are represented in the writings of another white academic: Denise Cuthbert. In examining Cuthbert's research I hope to provide an account of how certain voices are rendered invisible, whilst other voices enact violence simply in their speaking. I conclude by suggesting, following Ravenscroft and Fallon (2002), and drawing upon the work of Moreton-Robinson (2004) and Nicoll (2004), that what is required is the beginnings of an account of 'ethical speech' that locates white Australians firmly upon the ground of Indigenous sovereignty and within a relationship to the possessive

investments that continue to shape the Australian nation.

The Spoken

In her research on the experiences of white foster/adoptive mothers of Indigenous children, Cuthbert renders visible a particular set of relationships that she feels have been given little or no space. She states, for example, that "non-Aboriginal adoptive and foster mothers of Aboriginal children have been rendered invisible and silent in the process of coming to terms with [an increasingly acknowledged] assimilationist history. For these women, their experiences have gone from being not spoken about to being not able to be spoken about; i.e. from the 'unspoken' to the 'unspeakable'" (2001: 142). Despite acknowledging that talking about the experiences of these mothers is difficult, challenging and inherently problematic, Cuthbert nonetheless considers important the act of creating a framework wherein that which has been rendered unspeakable is at the very least represented.

One way in which Cuthbert provides justification for making the white mothers' experiences speakable is through analogising their experiences to those of Indigenous mothers. Thus despite acknowledging the "incomparable suffering of the thousands of Aboriginal mothers whose children were forcibly removed" (2001: 142), Cuthbert sets up a direct comparison between the white foster/adoptive mothers of Indigenous children that she interviews and the Indigenous mothers from whom the children were removed. She states clearly that:

Just as Aboriginal mothers, who endured the tragic loss of their

children, were rendered silent and invisible by the processes of child removal, the role of the non-Aboriginal women who raised these children, either directly or indirectly, in response to the assimilationist imperatives of governments and the part they played in this historical process have now also been occluded. A perspective that allows us to consider such *parallels* may provide a way of seeing the experiences of *both sets* of women in terms other than those offered by the prevailing discourses, both those pertaining to adoption generally and those dealing with the forced removal of Aboriginal children specifically (2001: 142, emphases added).

As can be seen in the words placed under emphasis, Cuthbert appears intent upon bringing the white and Indigenous mothers into a relationship that, whilst acknowledging the potential complicity of the white mothers with 'assimilationist imperatives', nonetheless effectively denies this complicity through the comparisons drawn. The consequence of this is that the ongoing violence enacted against Indigenous communities as a result of the process of removal becomes a secondary narrative to the presumed-to-be shared (or 'parallel') pain of being 'rendered silent and invisible' that both Indigenous and white women are depicted as experiencing.

This of course begs the following question: are we to believe that the white mothers are rendered invisible in ways that are even remotely commensurate to the denial of life and connection enforced upon Indigenous mothers (and their families and communities) via colonisation? Whilst the white mothers' specific narratives of fostering/adoption may hold considerably less cultural capital in contemporary Australia than they may

have in the past (as Cuthbert cogently elaborates), the women themselves can in no way be considered invisible as *white women* in a society that accords considerable space and representation to white women (amongst white people more generally: see Nicoll, 2000, for an elaboration of this point). To conflate the relative lack of representation of these women's narratives with the lack of representation of Indigenous people more generally in Australia does a great disservice to the 'tragic loss of their children' experienced by Indigenous mothers and communities.

In another paper produced from this project, Cuthbert legitimates her research method through a comparison between her own project and that of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *Bringing them Home* (1997) report. She states that:

A further appeal of a methodology which invited women to tell their own stories in the terms they found most appropriate was that it echoed what has become a dominant methodology in Aboriginal activism on the issue of forced child removal, with personal narratives of stolen children making significant contribution to the way in which this issue has been represented in the public sphere (2000: 212).

Here Cuthbert makes direct comparisons between Indigenous people's testimonies about forced removal (testimonies that occurred in the context of a decade-long state sponsored move towards reconciliation via the acknowledgment of colonial violence and its ongoing impact upon Indigenous communities), and white women's experiences of fostering or adopting Indigenous children. Here Cuthbert equates the need for issues of genocide and dispossession to be 'represented in the public sphere' with

the need of a group of white women to validate their experiences of mothering. The aforementioned problems associated with equating these two sets of experiences are exacerbated by the fact that whilst white people in Australia in general continue to enjoy considerable attention from all facets of the media and through the direct support of government policy (directed as it is by the needs and beliefs of white people), Indigenous people are still largely underrepresented in the media (or represented in negative ways) and are the objects of punitive government interventions.

Furthermore, Cuthbert does not mention the fact that governmental and legislative responses to the HREOC (1997) report failed to adequately address the findings of the report. As writing on litigation and witnessing by Indigenous people in regard to the effects of child theft continues to demonstrate (e.g. Luker 2005; Moreton-Robinson 2004; Nicoll 2004), the response of the Australian government and Australian courts of law has typically been to deny the validity of the voices of Indigenous people represented within the report and in subsequent litigation demanding reparation. Such voices have been accorded only limited space within the realms of the courts and parliament, where the (white required) burden of proof has continually been asserted to deny the validity of Indigenous knowledges. In contrast to this, white voices continue to be accorded space, white testimonies continue to be recognised, and white forms of documentation continue to be prioritised. As such, Cuthbert reiterates the divide between which voices will be heard and which will not precisely at the very moment where she draws comparisons between white foster/adoptive mothers and Indigenous

mothers and their children who were stolen from them: in proposing this analogy and using it to justify her methodology, Cuthbert fails to see that her participants as *white women* are already clearly located within a racialised politics of voice wherein they can presume the right to speak, even if they (and Cuthbert) believe they are not necessarily heard. By contrast, whilst Indigenous people continue to assert their sovereign right to speak, this occurs in a context whereby only certain voices are acknowledged as 'truly speaking', when speaking is defined on the terms of whiteness and its framework of evidentiary proof.

Finally, by evoking the need to 'tell the stories' of white adoptive/foster mothers, and without locating these stories in a context whereby certain voices are always already accorded privilege, Cuthbert perpetuates a logic wherein only those voices recorded, examined, and analysed in particular ways are accorded validity. That her white participant's voices can be shared and thus known on the terms of whiteness only serves to recentre both Cuthbert and her participants' racial privilege: it does not require a decentring of their privileged speaking position (even if it does in places render visible their complicity with colonisation).

In this section I have highlighted how what is spoken, regardless of its reasons for being spoken, holds the potential for overwriting particular marginalised voices with the voices of those who already enjoy considerable privilege and representation. As Ravenscroft (2003) suggests; "There is no picture of 'black' and 'white' that can only represent; in the very act of trying to 'show', representation reproduces the old violences, the old logic, the old story" (240). In her desire (however much

tentative or clarified) to 'give voice', Cuthbert fails to recognise that what she speaks of, and the ways in which she speaks, contributes directly to a politics of voice that does not give sufficient attention to the multiple alternate voices that are *not* being spoken, as I elaborate in the following section.

The Unspoken

In focusing on the voicing of previously unspoken or unspeakable narratives, Cuthbert's account of loss and grief amongst white foster/adoptive mothers is premised upon a highly individualistic understanding of families and parenting. This allows her to 'give voice' to the white women for whom the pain of not seeing themselves represented in Australian society is great, yet this requires her to do so primarily by focusing solely on the white women as *individual women*. Cuthbert spends considerable time in each article produced from the project elaborating why she is tentative in how she positions the women. Yet it is possible to read this tentativeness as itself an evocation of the subject position 'middle-class white woman' that functions to deny the relevance of this subject position to the topic under examination. As Moreton-Robinson (2003; 2004) has demonstrated through her theorisation of whiteness as a proprietorial investment in warranting the 'goodness' of white people, the fear that many white people claim in the face of acknowledging our complicity with colonisation functions, at least in part, by decrying presumed accusations of racism, whilst failing to examine racial privilege. In the face of the violence of the narratives of her participants, and in regard to her own position as a white woman, Cuthbert reasserts the goodness of her participants (and indeed herself) by individualising their actions, and thus rendering them

exempt from accountability as *white people*. In other words, and following Nicoll (2004), whiteness functions within Cuthbert's research precisely by asserting the individuality of white people (and their actions), rather than viewing white people (and their actions) as enacting racial privilege that functions as a constant (albeit in differing ways) across white people as a *group*. As such, Cuthbert legitimises 'giving (more) voice' to the white women by first introducing them as white women who must be heard, and then summarily dismissing their whiteness (and thus race privilege) by individualising their narratives.

Cuthbert also appears to give little consideration to how different her research might have been had she also talked with the Indigenous children who are constantly referred to (often in negative ways), or (where possible) to the Indigenous mothers whose children were stolen from them. One can only wonder how different her account of 'similarities' might have been were she to have interviewed all three groups of people. The net effect of her focus solely on the white mothers is that Cuthbert only presents a very small part of a much wider narrative, and in so doing speaks only one particular (dominant) truth. As such, Cuthbert's drive to 'give voice' to one particular group of people results in the experiences of other groups of people being left unspoken. Whilst of course this is true of much research, it is particularly salient in this instance where the white mothers' experiences are premised upon the corollary trauma of removal experienced by Indigenous communities.

These points about the missing accounts of Indigenous mothers are particularly salient in relation to one paper from the project where Cuthbert (2001) focuses

exclusively on the account of one white mother. In this account (which, it should be noted, is subjected to the highest level of incisive analytic scrutiny) Cuthbert shares with the reader the insights to be gained as to how speakability plays out in the lives of the white women she interviews, and how particular forms of speech hold the capacity to wound. The narrative provided by the participant 'Faye' is cleverly problematised by Cuthbert for the ways in which it epitomises how the very articulation of particular knowledges can be experienced as harmful. To summarise the analysis: 'Faye' reports how, upon finding out about her adopted son's Indigenous birthright after nearly thirty years of care, she was forced to reflect upon some of the negative things she herself had said, and which had been said in her presence, about Indigenous people. In one particular narrative, 'Faye' reports on what she assumed her son's mother would be like:

Prior to me finding out about Michael being Aboriginal, Tom and I went up to Mildura and going along in the bus we see these Aboriginals living in their little humpies along the road and I said to Tom, 'God, look at them... !' They were so dirty ... and that was sort of my idea of how they would be, that they were all like this... Which Michael's mother, believe me, is far from what I imagined Aboriginals to be. She's a very clever woman in her own right and in the position she holds in the Aboriginal community (tape stopped at Faye's request as details of Michael's Aboriginal birth mother, her employment and family circumstances are described) (149-150).

This extract is interesting for the ways in which Cuthbert (via 'Faye') constructs speakable versus unspeakable subjects.

Whilst we must of course read the final comments in brackets as representing Cuthbert's respect as a researcher for the confidentiality of 'Michael's' birth mother,² it nonetheless signals a very clear break in how knowledge about characters in the narrative is represented within the article. In contrast to the witnessing we are called to provide for 'Faye' (and to a lesser extent 'Tom' and 'Michael'), we are barely able to discern the location of 'Michael's' birth mother within the text. Whilst she is clearly identified as not being like 'these Aboriginals living in their little humpies along the road', she is nonetheless still represented as a shadowy figure outside of the main narrative – her dispossessed relationship to Michael is, in effect, perpetuated by her location outside of the narrative.

Curiously, however, Cuthbert later identifies 'Michael's' birth mother as a "tertiary-educated professional" who (along with her other children) are "socially mobile, middle-class professionals" (2001: 151-152). That this form of identification is not a cause for erasure within the text is somewhat alarming, particularly if we are to consider the small percentage of Indigenous women who would be identified within the category 'tertiary-educated professionals'. One must thus very much read this descriptor as primarily serving Cuthbert's analytic purposes, rather than intentionally providing some space for 'Michael's' mother within the text. The net result of this particular set of representations of 'Michael's' birth mother is that she is located as an object of both Cuthbert and 'Faye' – her location outside of the category 'Aboriginals living in their little humpies' does not actually function to identify her as a subject with her own narratives. Instead, she is largely figured as a plot device, both for 'Faye' and for

Cuthbert. That Cuthbert subjects 'Faye's' account to significant analytic scrutiny is thus undermined by the fact that such scrutiny only serves to further accord subject-status to 'Faye', problematic as this is as it comes at the expense of 'Michael's' birth mother: she remains a largely unspoken object within the text.

These points about 'Michael's' birth mother highlight the silences that surround many accounts of the theft of Indigenous children. The *Bringing them Home* (HREOC, 1997) report being a notable exception, public discourse on the experiences of the Stolen Generation typically focuses on the experiences of children who were stolen from their families, but does little to examine the racial politics of reproduction for Indigenous communities post-colonisation. What is left unspoken, then, are the accounts of inter-racial relationships between Indigenous women and white men, relationships that were frequently constituted through rape, abduction, and other forms of violence committed against Indigenous women in the name of colonisation (see Haebich, 2000, for an elaboration of this). In her work on race and the 'genetic tie', Dorothy Roberts (1995) examines in detail how US law has historically been used to justify conditions of slavery (e.g., through the transmission of ownership matrilineally despite the racial identity of the father). In Australia the removal of Indigenous children into 'care' was typically predicated on the logic that 'lighter skinned' children were more likely to be assimilated through an upbringing provided by white families (or in service to white people). That these children were potentially the children of white fathers has received little attention or consideration, even though the implications of this are considerable

(Probyn,³ 2003, being a notable exception).

As I have briefly suggested here, Cuthbert's focus on the need to voice the previously unspeakable narratives of white foster/adoptive mothers of Indigenous children is premised upon the perpetuation of unspeakability. In other words, in order to bring her participants' stories into being, Cuthbert seems unable to equally give voice to the Indigenous mothers and children (and their potential fathers) within her writings. Indigenous people are thus largely left unmentioned within the texts, even as they are most often the topic of the white women's narratives: Indigenous women function as plot narratives (or objects of derision), but rarely as active subjects in their own right. Furthermore, Cuthbert authorises her white participants to speak precisely by denying their privilege as white women: she herself evokes the subject position 'middle-class white woman' to justify both her own speech and that of her participants, but in so doing she largely ignores the relevance of the location from which she and her participants speak. As I will suggest in the following section, the unspoken nature of both Indigenous narratives and the whiteness of both Cuthbert and her participants within the papers published from the project is thus largely the product of what appears to be issues that Cuthbert herself finds unspeakable.

The Unspeakable

Part of the problem, it would appear, facing Cuthbert in her analysis of the white women's narratives, is finding a framework within which to both do justice to their experiences, whilst also subjecting them to analytic critique in regards to their location as white people living in a colonial nation. I have

suggested already that this problem arises partly as a result of the sole focus on the white women's narratives, which are not forced to stand alongside those of Indigenous mothers or children. I would also suggest here that the problem of finding a framework is further exacerbated by (at least) two other things: Cuthbert's lack of engagement with the field of critical race and whiteness studies, and her failure to adequately consider the potential need for some stories to remain unspoken.

In regards to my first point, I do acknowledge that the field of critical race and whiteness studies was relatively young when Cuthbert collected her data and began analysing it for publication. Nevertheless, texts such as Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) *White Women, Race Matters* had been around for some time, and could be seen as crucial to constructing an informed account of white women's complicity with colonial regimes. One of the most significant contributions of the field, and one that I introduced in the previous section, is the concept of 'race privilege', which could have afforded Cuthbert significant analytic leverage for examining how the white mothers were both part of the 'assimilationist imperative' as well as being women living under patriarchy.

The both/and location of white women living under patriarchy is captured neatly in Ravenscroft's (2003) narration of Fallon: "she is the colonising subject and she acts against this and she is the colonising subject and..." (241). Whilst it is not apparent in the extracts that Cuthbert presents whether or not the white adoptive/foster mothers did attempt to 'act against' their role as colonising subjects, Ravenscroft's point is nonetheless salient: throughout the published articles from this project,

Cuthbert goes to considerable length to elaborate a very clear 'yes but' that informs her research: yes the women were complicit in the functions of colonisation, but they did so as women who were greatly disempowered via their location under patriarchy. As I have suggested elsewhere in regards to white queer people (Riggs, 2006), this is the wrong 'yes but'. An alternate formulation, as informed by a consideration of race privilege, would suggest that 'yes the women experienced disadvantage and co-optation as a result of patriarchy, but they did so as white women who nonetheless benefited from living under *white heteropatriarchy*'. A consideration of the function of privilege as central to the white mothers' experience may have helped to voice what appears to be the central, yet apparently unspeakable, aspect of Cuthbert's findings: white people who are represented as marginalised are still benefactors of unearned race privilege.

This then brings me to my second point about the problems within Cuthbert's analysis. Whilst in the last point, matters of race privilege appear to be in many ways 'unspeakable' for a feminist analysis of white foster/adoptive mothers, there are other matters that very much appear to be speakable for Cuthbert, but which, I would suggest, should perhaps remain unspeakable. As I suggested in the introduction, a politics of voice is inextricably linked to issues of power. This is exemplified by the weight accorded to the voices of white women in Cuthbert's research, where there is little attendant weight given to the voices of Indigenous women. (It could, for example, have been feasible for Cuthbert to utilise the *Bringing them Home* report (HREOC, 1997) as a means of standing the voices of Indigenous women alongside, or indeed against,

those of white women). This leads me to suggest, again following Ravenscroft (2003), that what is required is a consideration of the moments in which particular voices may need to be left unspoken.

Certainly in regards to the data presented by Cuthbert, we see yet more repetitions of white violence, where the voices of the white mothers are permitted to speak of Indigenous people in derogatory ways. Whilst Cuthbert signals her discomfort with this and mentions her challenges to the women in the interviews, we nonetheless witness yet again the violence of white privilege, with little attendant functional utility produced: the presentation of the narratives in most instances (other than the aforementioned analysis of 'Faye') do very little, in my reading, to shift how particular voices function to enact violence. My point thus is not that the white foster/adoptive mothers' voices should be occluded from the public record *per se*, but rather that their presentation must do more than simply exhibit them as (potentially) 'racist voices' – it must also extrapolate from them opportunities for shifting the priority accorded to particular voices. For, as Ravenscroft (2003) suggests:

To the extent that [Fallon's text] might be 'autobiographic', it is the autobiography of all white Australians, the story of our own origins that we nevertheless disavow. In this sense it is not Fallon's story, or not her story only. It is the one 'we', as white Australians, write too. It is the story in which we are all implicated, the story that we write so that we can be written (235).

Elaborating this point may have assisted Cuthbert in extrapolating how it is that the white women's accounts demonstrate *all* white people's complicity with colonisation – how the

women's narratives are narratives of a nation founded upon dispossession and genocide.

Nicoll (2004) offers one way of thinking about whiteness that highlights the need to forcibly locate white people within a relationship to Indigenous sovereignty. Nicoll terms this approach 'falling out of perspective', in which white people engage with the complex terrain of race relations in Australia by actually locating ourselves on the ground of Indigenous sovereignty, rather than continuing to claim an objective position outside of the ongoing effects of colonisation. This would certainly appear a useful approach when considering Cuthbert's work, particularly in regard to her deployment of the politics of voice and its reliance upon certain forms of voicing and testimony. Cuthbert's implicit theorisation in places of the white women as somehow removed from accountability occurs because she allows space for the women's narratives to exist merely as 'perspectives' upon colonial histories – she does not sufficiently connect their narratives to their actual embodied practices as white people.

Moreton-Robinson's (2004) elaboration of what she terms the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty further suggests how Cuthbert's failure to connect the women's narratives to the ongoing practices of colonisation is informed by a possessive logic that relies upon claims to an objective perspective on the part of white people. In this sense, whiteness functions as a form of possession that is constructed as resulting from merit and 'hard work', not from the effects of illegal possession and genocide. Yet this logic only holds true if white people continue to enact a 'postcolonising amnesia' (Luker 2005) in the face of the well documented fact of

colonial violence. In this sense, the desire to claim any form of 'objective location' requires white people to speak from outside of colonial relations – to theorise and live colonisation as something to which we do not have a relationship. Cuthbert enacts this 'position from above' when she fails to adequately locate herself as a benefactor of white privilege, and where she allows her participants' narratives to stand as relatively disembodied reflections upon 'mothering the other': her accounts of the women's actual parenting practices and their beliefs about Indigeneity come to stand in for colonisation, yet in so doing are divorced from the real world effects of child theft and genocide. The net effect of this attribution of perspective or distance to both herself and her participants allows Cuthbert to reassert a possessive logic whereby what one claims to do or have done is read as justification for one's social location: most of the women claim to be good mothers, and Cuthbert claims a location as a good researcher, hence these positions are taken *a priori* as being true. Yet this fails to adequately address the investments that the participants and Cuthbert have in legitimising a particular view of Australian history, and its role in propping up white race privilege.

'Falling from perspective', as Nicoll (2004) suggests, would require both Cuthbert and her participants to land squarely within the terrain of Australian race relations, and to consider how their speaking effects certain silences, how their own narratives in many ways overwrite the narratives of Indigenous families and communities, and yet how this overwriting always fails to deny the fact of Indigenous sovereignties, and ongoing resistances to white hegemony. In the very process of speaking of whiteness Cuthbert both reifies it and

normalises its effects. A move toward 'falling from perspective' may have assisted Cuthbert (and if incorporated into her methodology, her participants too) in recognising how claims to voice are always already located within a field of racial politics that make possible the telling of particular histories that are reliant upon the silencing of others.

Conclusion

Of course my writing in this paper may to some read like one white academic attacking another and in so doing claiming the moral high ground. My interest in this paper, however, has neither been to dismiss Cuthbert's work outright nor to somehow locate myself outside of whiteness. Rather, my interest has been to examine how some of the academic research practices that embody a particularly white way of being and knowing about the world serve not simply to perpetuate white hegemony, but in so doing preclude reflexivity about the role of race privilege. Thus, following Moreton-Robinson (2003), I have attempted to demonstrate the subject positions that are allocated to white women within academia and by white academics, and how these are often reliant upon the objectification of Indigenous people.

To counter this I have proposed that any politics of voice must give consideration to the ways in which some voices are heard at the expense of others, and that in the process of warranting particular voices it is often the case that certain people are constructed as active subjects at the expense of other people who are constructed as objects. In her role as the 'Doctor from the University' (2000), it is incumbent upon white researchers such as Cuthbert to engage in methods that foreground issues of privilege and its functioning in accounts

of colonisation. Most importantly, and as Ravenscroft (2003) suggests, this entails white researchers (such as Cuthbert and myself) critically examining our own locations as white people who, whilst holding differential relationships to the norm of white-male-middle-class-able-bodied-heterosexuality, nonetheless benefit from the legacies of colonial violence. Considering how our speaking may at times contribute to such violence is thus central to engaging in a politics of voice that is mindful of the racialised power dynamics of academic research and public spaces, and the implications of this for ways in which we speak about (and ourselves inhabit) the lives of white people.

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Endnotes

¹ It is important to note here that whilst in other non-fiction work Fallon identifies herself as a white foster mother, the piece examined by Ravenscroft reads as a fictionalised account spoken through multiple voices.

² One can only hope that the many forms of information shared about 'Tom' and 'Michael' meet with their approval as to the public availability of their lives.

³ It is important to note that whilst Probyn's account contributes an important theoretical framework to understanding how and why white fathers are largely missing in the public record, it does so in places through a similar logic to that employed by Cuthbert: it potentially constructs white fathers as 'victims' of colonisation. For example, she states that "Cohabitation [with Indigenous women] mean that white fathers lost whatever privileges were associated with whiteness" (2003: 70). This, I would suggest, is a significant overstatement of the prohibitions placed on white fathers of Indigenous children, and one that fails to grasp the differential functions of privilege.