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The Intersections of Critical Race and Whiteness Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and Critical Animal Studies

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As I have written about elsewhere, being introduced by Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson to the field of critical race and whiteness studies enabled me as a white gay man to develop tools through which to think about a tension I had struggled with: experiences of advantage and experiences of disadvantage (Riggs, 2018). Specifically, coming to an understanding of race privilege allowed me to locate my sexuality within a broader set of identity categories, and in so doing see how any disadvantages I experience as a gay man are always already shaped by my privileges as a white cisgender man. Whilst I don't always explicitly work with concepts from critical race and whiteness studies in my current work, it shapes how I see the world around me, and how I respond to the topics I research.

In many ways I have taken a similar journey, or what Fiona Nicoll (2004) refers to as 'falling from perspective', with regard to parenting and kinship. As someone who grew up in a family that was decidedly located in the centre, I entered into adulthood with a particular way of thinking about kinship that was relatively taken for granted and unquestioned. Even when I came to parent as a gay man, and to parent children to whom I am not genetically related, the taken for grantedness of kinship as a human enterprise was never really something that I questioned. Moreover, kinship as a human enterprise was, despite my awareness of race privilege, something that I narrowly viewed through a solipsistic lens of *white* human kinship relationships. This was evident when I wrote about what was then a strident critique of the norm of genetic relatedness, a critique that failed to attend to how claims to genetic relatedness are racially differentiated, and in the context of Indigenous sovereignty, can be vitally important.

Much like my whiteness, then, my inculcation into normative family relations as a young person growing up and into early adulthood meant that I couldn't see the limitations of the (presumed to be insightful) vantage point that I thought I had gained by becoming a parent other than through reproductive heterosex. Specifically, my role as a parent in many ways reinforced normative assumptions about what it means to be a culturally intelligible white adult: the expectation to leave school, develop a career, meet a partner, and have children. The fact that I traded on such forms of intelligibility that were both white and anthropocentric became even more

evident to me when I began undertaking research in the field of critical animal studies. Whilst I have lived with animals for almost as long as I have been a parent, and whilst I certainly have shared loving and meaningful relationships with animals, I didn't have the critical literacy necessary to question how animals are viewed as anything other than 'property', and what that means for animals in a world that is so resolutely anthropocentric.

Critical animal studies, then, gave me the tools through which to see human exceptionalism at work in the standard narrative of human kinship, much like critical race and whiteness studies gave me the tools to see the whiteness inherent to my work on sexuality (and in my work on kinship). To see how non-human animals are instrumentalised in the name of human kinship; to see how non-human animals are often excluded from claims to kinship; and to see that any account of kinship studies must start from a place of acknowledging and then working with the effects of both instrumentalisation and exclusion (Riggs & Peel, 2016). And as with critical race and whiteness studies, critical animal studies doesn't simply give me more tools to work with in my research. It also allows me to view my relationships in different ways. It gives me ways to narrate my relationships with animal companions, to see their personhood (even if that seeing is always from the vantage point of a human), and to engage with critiques of, for example, animal abuse. This is not to say that engaging with racism or animal abuse can only be done through the critical frameworks mentioned above. Rather, it is to suggest that they add to the ways in which I challenge or respond to racism or animal abuse, because they fundamentally challenge how I view both racial and species differences and my location within them.

As the narrative above might suggest, a logical next step is for my work to explore the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and species. In collaboration with Nik Taylor, Heather Fraser, and Shoshana Rosenberg, I am currently working on a book project that will explore these intersections, with many chapters drawing on critical race and whiteness studies through which to frame how primarily white lesbians, gay men, and bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people understand their relationships with animals. Such relationships include those which centre an account of LGBT politics that either attends to or ignores the abuse of animals. It also requires a critical examination of how narratives that equate homosexuality with bestiality *and* narratives that seek to dehumanize the lives of people who are not white intersect with the human exceptionalism that shapes the lives of LGBT people who share their lives with animals. Finally, and in terms of sovereignty, the book will consider how certain 'radical' accounts of LGBT lives fail to theorise the relationship that white LGBT people have to the land upon which we live.

In multiple and complex ways, my entire academic career to date has been shaped by critical race and whiteness studies. The critical underpinnings that it has provided in terms of the importance of an intersectional approach have always greatly strengthened the work that I do, and the ways in which I live my life. To have been a part of the history of ACRAWSA, and to participate in this relaunch of *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies* is, thus, truly a privilege.

Author Note

Professor Damien Riggs is an Australian Research Council Future Fellow. His Fellowship focuses on family diversity, and to date has included studies of public

attitudes to family diversity, transgender parents, fertility preservation, heterosexual first time parents, surrogacy, foster care, and embryo donation. Damien has published prolifically on questions of race and whiteness, and is former President and Publicity Officer for ACRAWA.

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