Priscilla, (White) Queen of the Desert: Queer Politics and Representation in a "Postcolonising" Nation

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Abstract:
The brief analysis presented here of both *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and the work of Padva has highlighted some of the problems facing white queer politics in Australia. My intention has not been to provide a definitive reading of either text, but rather to draw attention to some of the problems that they present for representations of white queers in Australia. Not only does the analysis demonstrate the troublesome ways in which white queerness engages with race in Australia, but it also highlights some of the assumptions around racialised and gendered privilege that inform queer politics. As three white queer characters, and myself as a white gay man, we experience considered privilege as a result of our social location. This is something that I believe requires accountability, and something that is not easily theorised away or discounted through recourse to "good intentions." Being a white queer in Australia does not place us outside of racism, nor does it mean that our self-representations are not seen as oppressive by those who identify as non-white.

1 In this paper[1] I ask some necessarily difficult questions of both myself as a white gay man, and of white queer politics and representation more broadly. Primarily, my intent is to examine what it means to speak from a political position as a white queer person living in a country such as Australia, one that has been referred to by Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson as "postcolonising" rather than "postcolonial." Moreton-Robinson proposes "the verb postcolonizing to signify the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonizing relationship that positions [Indigenous people] as belonging but not belonging" ("Still Call" 38). Moreton-Robinson contrasts this with the more common term "postcolonial," which she suggests is not appropriate in the Australian context, as "Indigenous belonging challenges the assumption that Australia is postcolonial because [Indigenous] relation to land […] [what Moreton-Robinson terms an "ontological belonging"] is omnipresent, and continues to unsettle non-Indigenous belonging based on illegal dispossession" (24). These points about the "postcolonising" status of contemporary Australia suggest to me that an interrogation of white queer belonging by white queers is of central importance to examining how queer politics operate, and their potential limitations in the Australian context.

2 In addition to my focus on what it means to engage in queer politics as a white person in Australia, I am also interested to look at how queer politics are always already gendered in

[1] I begin by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Kaurna people, traditional owners of the land upon which I live in Adelaide, South Australia. Thanks to Greg for support and proof reading, and to our foster child Gary, for bearing with me whilst I wrote this paper.

particular ways. Here my interest is in examining how particular forms of queer representation achieve hegemony, and how these may, or may not, resist normative forms of gendered embodiment as they are currently configured under white heteropatriarchy (Riggs, "Caught"). In writing about gender as a white gay man I am thus interested in exploring how the first and last descriptors in this identity position may often result in a range of unearned privileges that greatly outweigh the central descriptor. Whilst queer politics have necessarily focused on discrimination (amongst other things) that results from the marginalisation of queer sexualities, my question is as to whether this focus may represent a failure to examine how such sexualities may still often be highly reliant upon particular normative assumptions around gender and race.

3 In order to engage in this examination, I first elaborate upon a theoretical framework provided by Aileen Moreton-Robinson ("Possessive"), namely what she terms "the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty." Her cogent analysis of land rights decisions in Australia demonstrates how white people in Australia are invested in claiming particular forms of belonging and ownership, and how this serves to disavow Indigenous sovereignty. My interest in the framework she provides is twofold: first, to look at what it means to claim belonging as a white queer person in the context of a postcolonising nation, and second, to examine how such claims to belonging may represent a specifically queer investment in the hegemonic practices of the white nation. By focusing on how white queers may desire to belong to a particular white national imaginary, I propose that queer politics (as elaborated by white queers) may at times do very little to challenge how race circulates as a discourse in Australia that both privileges and oppresses.

4 Having outlined this particular interpretive framework, I go on to examine one particular site where representations of white queers may be seen to generate a relatively narrow version of queer politics, one that does little to address issues of colonisation and dispossession. My examination of the film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, alongside a reading of one particular paper that focuses on the politicality of the film (Padva), will serve to highlight how forms of white queer representation may at times be complicit with white hegemony in Australia. To sum up, then, my intent in writing this paper as a white gay men is to contribute to the burgeoning literature in Australia (Nicoll; Offord; Riggs, "What's Love"; "Possessive") and abroad (Bernard; Berube) that seeks to problematise the assumption that white queers are only and always oppressed, and that being queer places one outside of enacting oppression against others. More specifically, my aim is to demonstrate a form of white queer accountability that recognises the ground upon which I stand, and the

relationship that I am in to the fact of Indigenous sovereignty.

White queer possessive investments

5 As the white Australian nation continues to be confronted by the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, alongside a growing acknowledgment of ongoing histories of colonisation and dispossession, there exists a profound uneasiness in relation to white claims to belonging in this country. For some white people, this uneasiness is routinely dismissed through recourse to discourses of "Indigenous violence," or the "civilising mission." Such discourses are used to justify colonisation and thus discount the histories of white violence that Indigenous narratives record (Riggs & Augoustinos). Yet in much the same way, white people in Australia who seek to challenge oppression may just as easily be engaged in disavowing ongoing histories of white violence (Riggs, "Benevolence"). This may occur when white people claim to "do good for the other," when white people (such as white queers) claim for themselves an oppressed subject position, or when white people presume that their anti-racist practice puts them outside of the discriminatory framework of racism.

6 Aileen Moreton-Robinson's ("Possessive") work on the "possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty" suggests three key aspects that demonstrate the investments that white people in Australia have in perpetuating such forms of disavowal. Firstly, she suggests that the possessive logic "works ideologically and discursively to naturalize the nation as a white possession," secondly, that it is "predicated on exclusion and what it does not own — the sovereignty of the Indigenous other" and finally, it "promotes the idea of race neutrality on the premise that 'race' only belongs to the other" (5-6). In this section I will elaborate some of the implications of these points in regards to white queer claims to belonging in Australia.

7 An example of when those of us who identify as white queers may demonstrate an acceptance of a possessive logic is when we attempt to seek equality with the white heterosexual majority in regards to rights. The claiming of rights by white queers may signify a desire not only to have our entitlement to such rights recognised, but also to have the legitimacy of white queer identities acknowledged as valid forms of citizenship (Phelan). This desire for an acknowledgement of validity (in addition to the right to civil liberty and protection), whilst understandably representing a desire to live a life free of anti-queer violence, also signifies a desire for acknowledgement within a white national imaginary — one that as Moreton-Robinson ("Possessive") suggests is founded upon the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty. The particular white national imaginary that I refer to here is

one that seeks to disavow ongoing histories of white violence, one that seeks to construct the white nation as a good nation, and one that ultimately seeks to posit an a priori right to belonging for white people in Australia.

8 The desire by some white queers to secure a place within such a white national imaginary may therefore potentially come at significant cost. One example of this may be the ways in which white queers are encouraged to make a committed investment to the terms for belonging as set by the nation. To seek protection within the nation, and to do so through a desire for an acknowledgment of being requires taking on board (at least to some degree) the terms for sanction determined by the State (Butler). This obviously presents a problem to white queers, namely; whose rights and desires take precedence in a postcolonising nation? Should our primary responsibility as white queers be first to an ethical engagement with Indigenous sovereignty, and only then to securing rights for other groups of people who are also currently disenfranchised within the national space? Or, as Shane Phelan has suggested, does a desire for full citizenship on the part of white queers require a radical rethinking of national belonging that would take as its ground the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, a move that could be productive of a "queered" national space that could then begin the important work of rethinking how we understand belonging? And of course there is the pressing need to consider what it may mean to be a queer person living in Australia who does not identify as white, and who may well experience an uneasy relationship to lesbian and gay rights movements that typically do not allow a space for representations of queer non-white people: how is citizenship possible for someone whose life is disavowed in multiple, concurrent ways?

9 The previous point about reconfiguring the national space suggests that there is a pressing need to examine how particular groups of people are currently afforded some form of belonging, whilst others are excluded. White queers who seek a place within the nation as recognised citizens thus trade on the configurations of national imaginary that are currently sanctioned, and which are founded on both the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty and the construction of other groups of people (such as asylum seekers) as enemies of the nation. Understanding white queer belonging from this perspective may involve viewing belonging as a practice of co-option, whereby previously disenfranchised groups (such as white queers) are given space within a white national imaginary (albeit on terms highly delineated by the heterosexual majority) in order to reinforce the hegemony of whiteness (Riggs, "Possessive"). Complicity with such practices thus reveals the contingency of queer rights upon the forms of citizenship already available within colonial nations, rather than necessarily representing a

radical repudiation of "heteronormative citizenship" (Johnson).

10 Carol Johnson suggests that the terms for white queer belonging that are set by the nation encourage a form of passing, whereby those of us who identify as white queers must be complicit with our own oppression in the form of passing off our relationships as "just like" heterosexual relationships, and in not being "too threatening" in our behaviours and words in public spaces. She suggests that this encourages the performance of the subject position "good queer," whereby certain non-heterosexual bodies are granted recognition as a result of their ability to look as the nation would desire them to look (i.e., not queer, not threatening, not subversive, etc.).

11 One of the key problems that arises from this location of white queer identities within the terms of a white national imaginary is that it is premised upon the exclusion of particular queer identities that do not or cannot conform to those deemed acceptable (Phelan). Thus, for instance, whilst white lesbians or gay men may be granted recognition by the white nation, it is far less likely that bisexual or transgendered individuals or those in polyamorous relationships will be recognised as equally entitled to rights. This draws attention to the distinction between access to rights, and acknowledgement of being — whilst some white lesbians and gay men may be able to gain acknowledgement of the validity of our relationships within the national imaginary, this may come at the expense of those queer families or relationships that are not accorded acknowledgement (Stoler).

12 Furthermore, it is not only the case (as previously outlined) that some white queers are able to claim a space within the white nation as a result of ongoing colonising violence against Indigenous people (e.g., in regards to the refutation of land rights claims and the refusal to offer an apology or negotiate a treaty). The white nation also reinforces its hegemony by positioning certain groups of people (e.g., asylum seekers) as being enemies of the nation. Whilst of course many white men and women, both heterosexual and queer, do indeed challenge the government's policies on mandatory detention and other forms of human rights violations against asylum seekers, this does not negate the fact that our belonging as white people is further secured through the construction of certain groups of people as enemies. Indeed, recent political and media representations in Australia of the "children overboard" scandal demonstrates one of the ways in which the white nation is constructed as inherently good through contrast with those groups of people positioned as being "dangerous" or "unworthy" of belonging. Reports of asylum seekers threatening to throw their children overboard in order to be granted asylum (reports which have since been shown to be false) are but one example of claims made by the white nation in order to bolster the contrast between

white Australians who "deserve to belong," and asylum seekers who do not (O'Doherty & Augoustinos). Here the motivations for any person seeking asylum are marginalised, and asylum seekers are instead positioned as threats both to their own children, and to the integrity of the white nation (Hage).

13 As I have outlined in this section, white queer belonging in Australia, much like white belonging in general, is highly contingent upon the disavowal of ongoing histories of white violence. White queers who seek a place within a white national imaginary, whilst potentially doing so in order to secure rights and protection, do so by accepting the terms set for belonging through the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty. By failing to acknowledge the privileges that white queers experience as white people, queer rights campaigns may do very little to engender a form of politics that is critical of white hegemony. And it is to this point that I turn in the following section.

Race, gender and queer politics

14 Queer theory has played an important role in developing understandings of subjectivity that focus on its multiplicities and fractures: subjectivity in this sense is seen as ever-changing rather than fixed, and thus as flexibly deployed towards particular ends in everyday interactions. The purpose of such theorising is in part to demonstrate how particular (sexual) identities achieve hegemony, and how others are positioned as deviant. Queer theory also questions sexual and gendered categories themselves, and interrogates how they are involved in maintaining hierarchical relations. However, as Barnard suggests, queer theory has often implicitly (and at times explicitly) been white queer theory — it is more often than not written by white queers, it often fails to engage with the critiques elaborated by queers who do not identify as white, and it neglects to adequately theorise how queer identities are always already racialised. This may in part be seen to result from the location of queer theory within the Western academy: queer theory, and the politics that it arose from, are largely the product of the standpoints of white queers, and in particular white, middle-class, queer men. This group of people (of which I am a member), whilst obviously facing considerable social oppression and prohibition, nonetheless benefit from living in a social system that is founded upon the values of white men (Riggs, "Possessive"). Obviously it would be naïve to suggest that queer theory has not been influenced by a wide range of theorists from all walks of life, but as Barnard points out, this has not stopped the canon of queer theory from being mainly white, and thus largely written by people who enjoy considerable privilege.

15 These points about queer theory (and its connections to contemporary queer politics) suggest to me the pressing need to think through the ways in which particular identity categories (no matter how multiple or fragmented) are valourised within Western societies. As I have already suggested, Moreton-Robinson's ("Possessive") framework of the "possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty" provides us with one means of examining how identity categories shape our politics. The utility of this approach is that it seeks to understand how practices of racialisation are central to identities, and it draws attention to the considerable privilege that white people experience in Australia as a result of our racialised subject positions. This is of particular relevance to queer rights campaigns that are often primarily predicated upon the experiences of white lesbians and gay men. Thus as Moreton-Robinson (Talkin' 45) suggests, "white lesbian women do not give up all of their race privilege because of their sexuality": the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty affords white queers the privilege to claim an intelligible subject position within colonial nations (i.e., one who is in some way or another committed to a white national imaginary), and it provides us with the voice through which to speak out about our experiences of oppression and to *expect them to be heard*.

16 To return to my earlier points about queer theory, then, it is necessary to maintain a focus on the fact that whilst claims to multiplicity in relation to identity may well be of use to white queers who find norms of gender and sexuality to be oppressive, they may not necessarily be useful (or useful in the same way) to those queers who do not identify as white. In addition, a focus on sexual multiplicity and fragmentation does not necessarily require white queers to examine our own complicity with whiteness, nor the benefits we gain from living in a society that privileges the values of white people. Whilst focusing on complicity and privilege may not necessarily be high on the priority list for those white queers involved in activism, I believe that it is important that this focus is given greater consideration within queer politics. Thus, whilst approaches such as those advocated by queer theorists may be useful for challenging heteropatriarchy, it is important to incorporate a focus on how subjectivities in Western nations continue to be shaped through discourses of race. Otherwise, as Bernard suggests; "no matter how coalitional its compass, [any rights campaign] that identifies itself in terms of gender and/or sexual orientation only […] will be a white-centered and white-dominated politics, since only white people […] can afford to see their race as unmarked, as an irrelevant or subordinate category of analysis" (3).

17 One example of how white queer politics can at times fail to critically interrogate the intersections between race privilege and oppression based on sexuality appears in the work of

Kitzinger and Wilkinson, two white lesbians who elaborate in their writings some of the precedents that have been used to push for marriage reform within the US. One particular case that is used repeatedly in this area is that of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which sought to challenge the racial segregation that existed in the US at the time. Whilst this has proven to be an important precedent for gaining access to marriage rights for white queers, the problem as I see it with using this case as a benchmark against which to contrast the exclusion of (primarily) lesbians and gay men from marriage is that it runs the risk that comes from trading on histories of racialised oppression to critique oppression based on sexuality. These risks I believe are twofold: first, it compares sexual and racial oppression in ways that may not necessarily be conducive to maintaining a critical focus on ongoing race privilege and discrimination. In other words, if white queers use legal challenges to racial oppression as a benchmark against which to measure oppression based on sexuality, then this may well serve to ignore the ways in which the privilege that white queers experience (as white people) comes at the expense of Indigenous and other people variously labelled as "non-white" who may or may not identify as queer. Second, the equation of sexual and racial oppression effectively sidelines the overlaps that exist between racial and sexual privilege and oppression (Barnard). In the context of Australia, for example, this could well work to position oppression based on sexuality at the forefront of rights issues, which would obviously do little to engage with the unfinished Treaty business that exists in Australia currently (Haggis; Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin'*). To equate racism with heterosexism may thus in many ways be to implicitly suggest that white queers are not racist, or for that matter, to suggest that white queer men (in particular) are not sexist. My point here is obviously not that white queers should not desire marriage rights (or any other form of rights for that matter), but rather that the use of analogies such as those made by Kitzinger and Wilkinson draw upon a moral position that may at times co-opt the voices of non-white queer people in order to warrant the moral positions held by white queer people. Moral authority in this instance is taken to be applicable across contexts, and as transferable between racially diverse populations. Such an approach does not pay significant attention to the incommensurable differences that may shape both the lives of white and black LGBTI activists, nor the range of political contexts within which particular moral claims are made, such as apartheid South Africa, Jim Crow US, and contemporary UK (where the previously mentioned authors are currently located). My suggestion is thus that whilst it is one thing for queer people who do not identify as white to talk about the similarities between racial and sexual apartheid, it is another thing entirely for white queer activists to do the same thing — it requires in part a claim to moral authority that

is in many ways unearned, and which in my opinion seriously undermines the truth claims of white LGBTIQ activists.

18 This brings me back to my earlier point about the canonical texts of queer theory, and their location within a particular social context that valourises the values of white middle-class men. Whilst queer politics are of course all about challenging the normative frameworks of gender and sexuality under heteropatriarchy, they are by no means exempt from perpetuating those same norms. Part of this problem may stem from the fact that "queer is nominally ungendered" (Barnard 11). Though ambiguities around gender are of course an important aspect of the challenge that queer politics present to heteropatriarchy, a failure to engage with the very real ways in which bodies are gendered can institute a logic where, much like the failure to interrogate race privilege, the gender privilege of some queers is also left unexamined. Whilst to destabilise gender binaries is a key function of the work of queer politics, this, I would suggest, should not come at the expense of examining how particular queer identities (no matter how multiple or fractured) stand to benefit from gender norms. This theme of how gender operates in queer politics and representation is one that I shall return to in the analysis that follows.

Priscilla and the racialisation of queer representation

19 Released in 1994, and written and directed by a white gay Australian man — Stephan Elliot — *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* is a campy take on the life of three white queers who travel together through the outback to perform a drag show in Alice Springs. Along the way the three main characters meet a number of different people from a range of backgrounds, some of whom become part of the story as it progresses. Whilst the film is primarily the story of the three main characters, and their own queer identities and forms of representation, I believe it can afford us particular insight into how white queer politics and representation operate in Australia. To supplement my reading of the film, I will also in this section engage with one particular academic paper (Padva) that has taken up the "cause" of the film, which is depicted in the paper as an example of the "politicization of camp subculture." Through a reading of these two texts, I will highlight how white queer politics in Australia may at times trade on particular hegemonic forms of representation, and how they may as a result fail to interrogate white privilege.

20 There are three particular areas of symbolism that I wish to focus on in this section in regards to *Priscilla*. First, I seek to explore how white queers are at times seemingly placed outside of oppression. Second, I look at how white queerness may be seen within the movie to

co-opt Indigeneity, and how this is simultaneously challenged by Indigenous people. And third, I wish to explore how white queer belonging is claimed, and how it is also unsettled within the film. These three foci will be interspersed with my own responses to the aforementioned paper that focuses on the politics of the film (Padva), in order to more closely examine how *Priscilla* has been read, and how such readings may similarly neglect to engage in an interrogation of the film's racial and gendered assumptions.

21 In regards to my first point of inquiry, I focus on one particular symbol of Australiana that is used within the film, namely, the kangaroo. More specifically, I am interested in two instances where the image of a dead kangaroo would seem to suggest a particular representation of queerness within the film. In the first instance, the three main characters find themselves lost in the middle of the desert when their bus ("Priscilla") breaks down. One character, Bernadette, goes out in search of assistance. As her search goes on, Bernadette finds herself in increasingly isolated areas of the desert. Luckily, she is fortunate to see a vehicle heading towards her. She manages to flag it down, and is given a ride by the elderly white couple who drive it. Unfortunately for Bernadette, she must sit in the back of the vehicle along with a dead, and rather fly-blown, kangaroo. Things get worse upon her return to the bus, where she fetches her two travel companions to meet her saviors, only for them to drive off in a cloud of dust when one of the queer men appears in drag, whilst the other is covered in pink paint. The elderly couple by implication are depicted as homophobic or otherwise uncaring about the plight of the three stranded characters and their bus.

22 The second time we see the symbol of the kangaroo is later that night, when an Indigenous man comes across the three characters and their bus. He invites them back to his campsite, where a group of Indigenous people are sitting near a open fire over which a kangaroo is roasting. When the three characters arrive at the campsite they are depicted as feeling somewhat uneasy about the stares from the Indigenous people, and unsure about how to engage in social interaction. This appears to be broken down when, following on from one Indigenous man playing the guitar, the three characters perform a number in drag for their (seemingly appreciative) Indigenous audience.

23 There appears to me to be a stark contrast in the film between the symbol of the dead kangaroo as it is associated with the elderly white couple, and the roasting of the kangaroo by the Indigenous people. In the first instance, the kangaroo represents a form of shaming of the character of Bernadette, identified in the film as transgendered. She is forced to sit next to the dead carcass, and for her trouble is abandoned by her would be white saviors. Here we see a contrast between the white queer characters, who are the ones being abandoned, and the white

(nominally heterosexual) characters, who are doing the abandoning. The next time we see the symbol of the kangaroo, however, we see the three white queer characters in the process of "being saved." Here the kangaroo may be taken to represent substance or aid offered, as opposed to the shame or discrimination offered when we first saw the symbol. The white queer characters are not only depicted as being saved by the Indigenous character, but are relatively straightforwardly welcomed (or indeed even embraced) by the group of Indigenous people. Here the symbol of the kangaroo implicitly aligns the white queers "on the side" of the Indigenous people — as engaged in a form of mutual recognition that stands in opposition to the imagery of the dead and rotting kangaroo associated with the elderly white couple. White queers in this sense are depicted as being on the side of "the good" — of those who are oppressed, rather than those who are doing the oppressing.

24 Likewise, within a paper written by Gilad Padva which focuses in part on the film, there is an implicit assumption that white queers are somehow beyond oppression. In his preliminary discussion of how camp representations can destabilise normative forms of representation, Padva suggests that the:

> proto-camp gestures developed by men like the mollies may have actually worked to displace the epistemological clarity of dominant codes of identity. Therefore, the early modern origins of English camp may actually have been those well-informed political practices that deployed the representation of the body against the growing bourgeois attempt to shape and control the subject. (223)

Whilst interesting, Padva's argument makes the implicit suggestion that English camp was inherently distinct from a bourgeois identity, and thus did not attempt to "shape and control the subject." The question that I would ask of this is; exactly which men were "well-informed" in their engagement with "proto-camp gestures," and how may these men themselves have been, if not bourgeois subjects, at least subjects who stood to benefit from being (presumably) white men living in a society that accorded significant privilege to white men? Padva's imagery of "proto-camp" men may thus be seen to do very little to challenge how such men may have not only been engaged in "displacing the epistemological clarity of dominant codes of identity," but also in asserting new, and equally oppressive (white, masculine) codes of identity. In other words, to depict white queers as "displacing" oppressive social practices may demonstrate a failure to examine how white queers similarly stood to benefit from such practices.

25 To return to the film again, and to my second point of inquiry in regards to co-option, we may see how particular white queer forms of representation engender a particular logic of reciprocity that is based upon appropriation rather than acknowledgment. In the remainder of

the storyline relating to the drag performance reported above, the three white queer characters notice during their performance that the Indigenous man who originally found them is merrily dancing along to the performance. This gives them an idea — to make him part of the performance! Thus we see a final set of routines wherein the Indigenous man is clothed in drag, and dances along with the three white queer characters. My concern with this particular representation is that whilst the Indigenous man in the first instance seems to offer a form of aid to the three white queer characters that acknowledges their need for help, their response to this aid is not an acknowledgement in return of the specificity of Indigenous experience, but rather is to some degree appropriative: it reads Indigenous experience through white queer experience. Of course my suggestion is not that the Indigenous man did not want to join in the performance, nor that he or the Indigenous characters were dupes of the white queers' performance. Rather, my point is that the form of reciprocity or relationship that is engendered between the two groups (white queers and Indigenous people) is one that appears to be largely directed by the white queers, and which does not problematise the white queers as being stranded *upon Indigenous land*. Rather, the white queers reciprocate the aid given to them by the Indigenous man by offering him a role in their performance, instead of themselves seeking to reciprocate on the terms set by the Indigenous man. As we are given no indication of the Indigenous man's sexual identity, we cannot interpret the accuracy of the white queers' reading of his dancing to the performance, nor what the Indigenous man's engagement with the performance meant *for the man himself*. Instead we are largely left with the viewpoint of the white queers.

26 Having said all that, there is I believe a great deal of space left open to the white viewer to think about and challenge the particular reading that I believe the film provides. First in this regard, when the white queers join the Indigenous people by the campfire they are depicted as feeling uneasy, a feeling that we see reflected in the alternately inquisitive or disinterested gaze of the Indigenous people. In other words, the white queers *are being seen*, but not on their terms. Second, the Indigenous people who watch the performance largely engage on their terms — we are left unsure as to what their laughter at the performance signifies, and we are shown that their reception of the performance suggests a particular Indigenous reading of white queer. This appears in the incorporation of the performance into the music already being performed by the Indigenous people, where the white performance becomes in part an aspect of the broader Indigenous context of the evening. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the following day, when he again assists the white queers in returning to their bus and securing a tow truck, the Indigenous man asks of them "so you

actually make money by dressing up like a woman?" This, I would suggest, implicitly reasserts an Indigenous reading of white queer representation, one that challenges the straightforward assumption that Indigenous people can be simplistically incorporated into white readings of Indigeneity. In this sense, white queerness becomes the other to Indigenous identity, rather than the other way round.

27 The challenge that Indigenous sovereignty presents here to the logic of white queerness is, I believe, indicative of the incommensurability that must be taken as a foundation to any dialogue between and Indigenous and white people (Haggis; Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin'*). In other words, rather than simply presuming a shared ground (as I have suggested the white queers did in attempting to incorporate the Indigenous man into their performance), it is important that white people acknowledge the differences that shape our experiences (through privilege) as distinct from those of Indigenous people. One example of this that I suggested in the previous section was in regards to white queer rights claims that trade on the rights claims of non-white people (e.g., in regards to segregation in the US). This is also evident in Padva's paper on *Priscilla* and camp representation. Drawing on the work of African American scholar bel hooks, Padva suggests not only that "the (straight) bourgeois attempt to manipulate the (queer) subject is similar to interracial relationship, especially between white dominant culture and black subculture" (222), but also that "[hooks'] claim for revision of black history and ethnic oppression can be associated with a demand for revision of queer history and heterosexist oppression" (223). Here Padva may be seen to engage in a form of co-option, whereby he presumes that the critique of racial oppression (as presented by hooks) can be mapped across to a (nominally white queer) critique of "heterosexist oppression." This form of co-option, besides running the dangerous risk of denying how white queers benefit from unearned race privilege and how white queers are never outside racism, also appears to depict people as being either queer or black. The question this begs of course is: "what does this mean for black queers?" Padva's paper would thus appear to attempt to make neat work of what is in practice nowhere near as neat: queer politics are never entirely outside of oppression, and the threat of co-option by white queers is the implicit flipside to critiques (in Padva's case of "bourgeois") co-option of white queers.

28 This leads me to my final point of inquiry, and one that also returns us to the earlier section on how white queers claim belonging. I believe that the film *Priscilla* provides us with at least two examples of how white queer belonging in Australia is unsettled often at the very moment where it is claimed. In the first example from the film, we see the bus stop abruptly when the driver (one of the white queer characters) first sees the massive expanse of the

desert. The three white queer characters step down from the bus to take in the enormity of what they face, and in that moment, when one of them suggests "maybe we should have flown," we hear the music of didgeridoos, an instrument most commonly associated with Indigenous people. This I take as an example of the awe and potential fear that the white queer characters are faced with when they are forced to engage with something they either cannot comprehend, or which cannot be easily assimilated. As a result, whilst the white queer characters are engaged in traversing a landscape to which they claim belonging, the landscape itself challenges this claim to belonging. Furthermore, the didgeridoos that we hear would seem to suggest that whilst the landscape would appear to be somehow "uncanny" or unfamiliar to the white queers, it may not be so to Indigenous people (at least those who play didgeridoos!). Whilst of course it is problematic that the landscape is automatically associated with didgeridoo music, it nonetheless serves to demonstrate the anxiety that white Australians often hold in regards to belonging in this country.

29 The second example of how white queer belonging is unsettled appears in what may be read as the penultimate moment of the movie. One of the characters (the one who had previously abruptly halted the bus ride) tells earlier in the movie of the fact that "ever since I was a lad I've had this dream, a dream that I now, finally, have a chance to fulfill: to travel to the centre of Australia, climb Kings Canyon (as a queen), in a full-length-Gaultier-sequinned, heels and a tiara." Following their arrival in Alice Springs, and the subsequent storyline there, the three white queer characters proceed to do just that: climb a rather large mountain in full drag. Yet when they stand at the top, seemingly queens of all they survey, there appears to be a gap between a desire for the type of belonging or unity that the dream may have suggested, and the actuality of it. Once they are all "at the top," Bernadette states "It never ends. All that space." To which the "lad with the dream" asks "so what now?" The third character responds by saying "I think I wanna go home." This to me signifies the characters' recognition of a disjuncture between the dream of being in the imagined space "at the top of Kings Canyon," and the desire to "be at home": belonging does not appear to come easily being dressed in drag at the "centre of Australia." This is not of course to say that white queers are *a priori* excluded from belonging "at the centre," but rather that dreams of belonging, which I would suggest inform a significant part of a white national imaginary, are not so easily fulfilled when faced with "all that space." Home is something that the white queer characters "go back to," rather than being something they carry with them — in contrast to what Aileen Moreton-Robinson ("Still Call" 31) has referred to as Indigenous peoples "ontological relationship to land" — that Indigenous people carry their sovereign rights to belonging with them through

their embodiment. White queer belonging in *Priscilla* is thus depicted as predicated on an anxious form of embodied belonging that only exists in particular "settled locations" that are taken as signifying in excess of "all that space."

30 So, to summarise, and to return to the paper by Padva one last time: camp, as represented in films such as *Priscilla* is not inherently political, where the term "political" suggests subversive or critical. Yes, certainly, Priscilla has a politics about it, one that speaks out about homophobia, stereotypes and queer identity. But that does not necessarily make it politically useful in the context of a postcolonising nation. Thus in contrast to Padva, who suggests that Susan Sontag's seminal text on camp misreads camp's political intent, I would not concur with his statement that "[camp] subculture's subversive aspects in fact politically challenge the social and cultural order" (217). Whilst it may be true that camp challenges particular aspects of the social order, as do queer politics and theory, they largely do so from the perspective of white queers, and with the agendas set by white queers. Camp, just like queer, may at times do much more than that, but to assume that it automatically does so would be to miss something crucial: that critiques of oppression may themselves not be free from enacting oppression. As I have suggested in this section, it is thus important that proponents of white queer politics in a postcolonising nation such as Australia examine their own assumptions, and challenge the privileges that they may presume.

Conclusions: Towards a situated queer politics

31 The brief analysis presented here of both *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and the work of Padva has highlighted some of the problems facing white queer politics in Australia. My intention has not been to provide a definitive reading of either text, but rather to draw attention to some of the problems that they present for representations of white queers in Australia. Not only does the analysis demonstrate the troublesome ways in which white queerness engages with race in Australia, but it also highlights some of the assumptions around racialised and gendered privilege that inform queer politics. As three white queer characters, and myself as a white gay man, we experience considered privilege as a result of our social location. This is something that I believe requires accountability, and something that is not easily theorised away or discounted through recourse to "good intentions." Being a white queer in Australia does not place us outside of racism, nor does it mean that our self-representations are not seen as oppressive by those who identify as non-white.

32 These are of course difficult statements to make, not primarily because they suggest a

need to engage in forms of accountability, but rather because they may be read by some as disavowing the need for some form of queer rights, or as overwriting white queer experiences of oppression. These I believe are necessary risks, and ones that I can take precisely because of being white. They therefore do not inherently represent examples of me actually "giving up power," but are rather moments where I enact the very power that comes from being white in a society that privileges white people. So what does this means for a situated queer politics?

33 First, I think it suggests that there must be much more to white queer politics than simply deconstructing heteropatriarchy. Heteropatriarchy is gendered and racialised as much as it is sexualised, and there is a pressing need to look at how white queers may well be complicit with oppression, even if we attempt to challenge its operations. Second, there is the need for white queers living in Australia to more adequately theorise our relationship to Indigenous sovereignty — how does it form the ground upon which we develop our politics, and what does this mean for the types of politics that we engage in? Third, we must recognise the incommensurable differences that shape white and Indigenous experience, and to pull back from trading on comparisons between racial and sexual/gender oppression. These types of comparisons, I believe, can only serve to marginalise the concerns of non-white people, and render invisible the experiences of queer non-white people. And finally, there is the need to recognise what these incommensurabilities signify: they arise as an outcome of colonisation, and as such they are a challenge to the claims to belonging of white queers. It will not suffice to simply recognise these differences: from this must follow a commitment to examining not what these difference mean *for other people*, but rather how these differences signify the tenuous location of white people in Australia, including white queers.

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