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White Normality, or Racism against the Abnormal

Comments on Ladelle McWhorter's *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*

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Ladelle McWhorter's *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America* (2009) is a compelling book. It makes the question of racism not only more complex and more frightening, to use McWhorter's words (which ring true for this reader) (296), but also more clearly systemic and persistent. The book reveals how racism affects almost every aspect of our contemporary lives, managing our relations to our own bodies as well as to those of others, and indeed molding those bodies themselves. In this sense, racism comes to mean more in this book than in popular, and in some academic, conceptions. *More in its extension*, since racism goes beyond the domination of "minority races in industrialized nations"

(296) to signify the management and purification of "the white race," hence implying the oppression not only of nonwhite races but also of whites who have been judged to be abnormal. *More in its temporal span and variation*, in that the book traces the genealogy of racism in its modern form through historically contingent processes and transcriptions from 1700 to the present in what we have come to call the United States (291). Here we witness economic and political interests, emerging scientific discourses, clinical practices and disciplinary mechanisms coming together to give rise to and continually "rephrase" racism (238)—permitting the formation of a white supremacist project that functions under different guises. But McWhorter's aim is also to reveal a *deeper* meaning to racism than common usage allows. And in this lies the book's simultaneously "frightening" and fascinating contribution.

To follow the book to its conclusion, through the detailed historical, empirical and scientific accounts that make it convincing, is to recognize that one's sexuality, gender, sexual orientation, ability or disability, class and nationality, *as well as* one's racial, ethnic and cultural identities are already *racialized*. They are racialized because they are positioned, constituted and managed within the same biopolitical movement that sustains white supremacy. In this sense, they can be deployed for racist ends—as part of historical and ongoing attempts to purify, protect and remake "the white race" to ensure its domination (296). All these aspects of identity, then, are touched by biopolitical racism, even when they seem to escape "racism" narrowly construed according to its 1936 definition as the irrational hatred of other morphologically identifiable races.¹ Moreover, I would say that these elements of identity operate to racialize the subjects to whom they are attributed. By being more or less normalized or construed as abnormal, they position subjects differentially with respect to whiteness—as included in or excluded from white normality.

That the question is more one of white normality than of whiteness *per se* is, I believe, important for McWhorter's argument. That whiteness comes to mean normality cuts both ways, for it means that those who are nonwhite are relegated to the abnormal, the outside, but it also means that whiteness itself must be normalized, policed, and purified of any lingering abnormalities within. It is in this way that biopolitical racism is both racism directed outward and racism directed within, to give my formulation of McWhorter's thesis to which I will return below. Both of these directionalities, inner- and outer-directed racisms, come together to form "racism against the abnormal" in McWhorter's appropriation of Foucault (citing Foucault, 32). Biopolitical racism, in other words, concerns more than the content of the concept of race. Rather, it is about the mechanisms by which "race" gets made, becomes something perceivable and measurable, and can be used to classify populations and individuals. More so, it is about how white supremacy comes to operate *under the cover of normality*, and by deploying a discourse of sexuality and deviance (168). In this way, white supremacy at once intensifies its function—extending to developmental aspects of bodily and psychological life that can be normed—and hides its explicit "racism"—the equivalence of nonwhite with abnormal means that nonwhite races can be targeted because of their alleged abnormality rather than their "race" (237-8). The white-nonwhite binary thus becomes operative in terms of normality-abnormality, so that "whiteness" (first as morphology and then as biology, or "Nordic germ plasm") comes to be seen and functions as the Race, but also as the Normal, the Family, and even the Human Race—the only one worth sustaining, reproducing and protecting, to the exclusion of others within and outside.

This attention to the mechanisms of biopolitical racism rather than the specific meanings of racial identities reflects McWhorter's endorsement of "genealogy-based politics,"

rather than identity-based politics (328). Though I do not think that all versions of identity politics need to be cast in opposition to genealogical, historical and structural analyses, I take McWhorter's concern to be with atomistic views of identity that understand each category to be self-contained and conceptually or historically separable from others. If what we seek is effective, historically aware solidarity and politics, seeing to the roots of the oppressions affecting us, we should resist the temptation to compartmentalize our identities and oppressions (327). Indeed, the tendency to compartmentalize may itself be a divisive strategy of biopolitics, where the desire for normality (and, in contemporary terms, for the normal family) can only be instantiated by disidentification and dissociation from others deemed abnormal (323). McWhorter's response to this division lies in her conceptualization of white supremacy as "racism against the abnormal." This biopolitical movement is presented in the book as unitary without being either homogeneous or statically self-same; rather, this is an internally articulated movement in which oppressions can be understood to interlock—to sustain, deploy, shape and give rise to one another.

By this, I do not mean to imply that McWhorter's project is a simple appeal to intersectionality. Indeed, intersectional theories, in their assumption of preexistent and separate axes of identity that then cumulatively interact, perpetuate the picture of identity that McWhorter criticizes (see p. 15). What I mean to point to here is, rather, an architecture in which dimensions are inseparable because each is articulated and deployed through others (implicitly and by means of historically contingent junctures). It is in this way that I see McWhorter to be cutting across the dilemma of one or many oppressions: one oppression is already many. This is not only in the sense that my oppression (the face of oppression I experience) already interlocks with those of others, but also in that my oppression is multifaceted, holding hidden

dimensions that operate under the cover of the face explicitly presented to me (327, quoted below). The apparent univocity of oppression—that my oppression as a woman is due only to sexism or gender oppression, as nonwhite to racism narrowly construed, as homosexual to heterosexism, as foreign to nationalism—is itself part of the way in which biopolitical racism hides its systematicity and true nature (white supremacy) and intensifies its operation, more effectively managing populations by isolating them.

McWhorter's account of the historical articulation between racism and sexuality renders the complex architecture of oppression—the hidden faces or networks of biopower—visible. McWhorter shows how racism and sexuality interlock; more precisely, she shows how scientific racism invents, or at least deploys and shapes, what we have come to call “sexuality” in the last two centuries (168).² I think it is important to emphasize that this is not a reductionist claim. Even if McWhorter's project can be read as reducing “sexuality” to a tool of racism (by giving precedence to racism in her reconstruction of the genealogy of sexuality, 169), it is important that McWhorter actively avoids reducing racism to sexuality.³ Rather, she points to the need to resist the facile interpretation of racism as sexually motivated, an interpretation that works at once to naturalize racism as a reaction to bodies, perceived as sexually threatening, and to hide its political, economic and disciplinary motives. (I refer the reader to McWhorter's deconstruction of the “myth of the black rapist” as justification for lynching, 157-161.) It may be that by the early 20th century “[r]acial difference . . . was sexual difference” (201). This was possible, however, only because sexuality and sexual difference were already inescapably racialized—arising as means for the white supremacist project to remake and manage the human race.⁴ The sexualization of race is thus not the replacement of race with sex (or racism with sexism and homophobia), but the re-interpretation and extension of racism under the cover of

managing sexual abnormality (and, hence, in a historically more acceptable and effective form). “Sexuality,” in other words, is a tool of white supremacy that allows it to continue to exclude other races, as well as other whites, under the guise of abnormality, while claiming not to be racist at all.

This non-reductive articulation of the relation between racism and sexuality is a strength of McWhorter's book. But to resist reduction is not yet to account for difference, and it is on the question of difference (and sameness) that I hesitate to follow McWhorter. In the introduction to *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*, McWhorter articulates the dilemma she faces as that of navigating two dangers, the risk of overemphasizing sameness and that of absolutizing difference (10-11). If meaning is given through relations of difference—the meaning of a phenomenon arising through differences with others—then I would say that the first danger represents loss of meaning through homogeneity, the erasure of distinction, while the second danger is loss of meaning through isolation, the erasure of relation. McWhorter's response to this dilemma seems to be to choose sameness (11), though to her credit the sameness she describes is that of a unitary but internally and diachronically complex movement of biopolitics. This way of thinking about her project informs various aspects of the book, and I believe sometimes unnecessarily occludes differences that may be useful to explore further. The dilemma, I would suggest, needs to be resolved differently. The two alternatives, of sameness and difference, are drawn so starkly that they prevent us from seeing a third option. Difference need not be so radical, or reified, as to blind us to connections; rather, there are differences that connect.

My worry is, then, with a reductionism of another sort. I noted above that biopolitical racism is both racism directed at other “races” and racism directed inward toward whites deemed abnormal. Despite their different targets, both

racisms have the same white-supremacist project; they operate to purify, protect, and remake the “white race” in view of white domination. McWhorter hence inscribes both directionalities as “racism against the abnormal.” But are they in fact the same, and is this the same abnormality? Though I find McWhorter’s definition of racism in terms of white supremacist biopolitics remarkably helpful for seeing to the core of modern racism, and though I agree with the role McWhorter assigns abnormality in this racist schema, I hesitate to assign inward- and outward-directed racisms the *same* role, position or meaning. To be clear, this objection is not an appeal to a hierarchy of oppressions; such an appeal would simply reinscribe the divisive strategy of biopolitics (described above), and, in setting up a scale of degrees, would indeed accede to sameness. What I am concerned with here is not a quantitative difference, but a structural difference, a difference of positionality that translates into experience. To say that bodies marked as racially, intellectually and sexually abnormal are managed within the *same* biopolitical movement of white supremacy is not yet to say how they are *differentially* positioned and constituted therein. Not only the disciplinary schemas used to manage them, their modes of normalization or marginalization and exclusion (216-217), but also the ways in which they are formed as subjects and hence their experiences within these schemas differ (34-5). These are differences that McWhorter notes, but the emphasis on sameness in the overall account sometimes seems to leave their depths unexplored.⁵ In this reader’s view, such a differentiated elaboration would only serve to strengthen McWhorter’s analysis.

Reading closely *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*, this differentiation is implicitly present at several junctures. That “all or virtually all people of color” are targeted by “racism against the abnormal” (218), while only a subsection of those defined as white are so targeted, is surely a statistical difference that implies qualitative differentiation.

It implies, at least, that nonwhites can be perceived and treated as a homogeneous group, whereas whiteness requires heterogeneous management. Arguably, while bodies targeted on both sides of the nonwhite-white binary are deemed abnormal, the abnormality of the first group is visible as a marker on the body (morphology, phenotype, bodily appearance), whereas the abnormality of the second remains hidden and needs to be diagnosed. This recalls Fanon’s claim that black bodies are “overdetermined from without.”⁶ Of course, “race” was not always so visible; this visibility had to be constructed, and the perception of racial difference instituted by law and habituated through educational and social practices (as McWhorter shows with the morphological invention of race in chapter two). But even when race became biology, and was read in terms of underlying developmental processes, bodily difference remained as its visible marker. This visibility permits, one may speculate, a more homogeneous treatment of nonwhite bodies, but also seems to render these bodies exemplars of abnormality; on these bodies, abnormality is naturalized as perceptual given. If this is the case—and I realize that I am departing from McWhorter’s account here—then racial difference seems to be the measure in terms of which other kinds of abnormality (intellectual, sexual, behavioral) are conceived. Though this measure of abnormality may change historically (sexuality and family life being contemporary contenders), its roots in “race” will leave a trace on how abnormality is seen. Such a speculation rejoins McWhorter’s analysis of the racialization of arrested development in scientific racist discourses, where the degeneration of whiteness is read as a recapitulation of nonwhite races, especially blackness (123, 137), and where sexual “deviance” is understood as developmentally equivalent to other races.⁷

McWhorter seems to allow for differences within the construction of the abnormal when she points to the ways in which biopolitics—or “biologized dividing practices” (319)—

distinguish inner and outer threats to normality (to “the white race” or the family). The content of these threats may vary historically, though stereotypes are often economically recycled (319). For instance, the threat to white evolution (or Nordic germ plasm) was conceived in scientific discourses of the late 19th–early 20th centuries in terms of two sources: “degenerative disease could be introduced into Anglo-Saxon bodies, and Anglo-Saxon bloodlines could become contaminated with inferior germ plasm” (150). Whereas masturbation, syphilis and other “race poisons” fell under the first category, social and sexual contact with “inferior” races defined an external threat (151-2). In the later 20th century, the family was seen as susceptible to external threats, from sexual predation to the welfare state, and internal threats of sexual and gender “deviance” in the form of the homosexual and the feminist (262-5). Although McWhorter sometimes assimilates inner and outer threats to the “same threat” (see pp. 153, 189, 194), I think that this distinction may hint at a productive way in which her concept of biopolitical racism can be extended.

In the same place where he speaks of “racism against the abnormal,” Foucault defines this racism as “internal racism” (cited by McWhorter, 32). *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America* draws a more complex picture, I think, for it reveals biopolitical racism to possess a double directionality, to be at once “internal” and “external” racism. Racism involves a network of oppressions that are posited in terms of inner and outer threats, threats that are differentially articulated and managed. To be clear, I am not claiming that these threats *really* fall inside or outside white normality, but that, in the service of the project of white domination and its divisive biopolitics, they are so constructed.⁸ Racism, in other words, involves a projective as well as a purifying directionality. In its projective direction, it abjects and scapegoats those whom it locates outside white normality—virtually all nonwhites but also a subsection of whites.

Targeting these bodies provides at once the point of support for the application of biopower and the point of departure for its justifications, as McWhorter shows (201). More so, I would add that this projection of an “outside” provides the mirror or counter-image according to which white normality can be oppositionally defined; by means of this oppositional mechanism the borders of white normality can be drawn and the work of internal management and purification motivated. The “outside” is hence representationally and practically needed for the operation of white biopower. Nonwhite bodies constitute an exemplary, hyper-visible target in this regard; they have historically occupied a kind of “absolute” outside, in relation to which other abnormalities might be differentially racialized (or abjected).⁹

Thus racism includes *both* the management and purification of “the white race” *and* the domination of other races. In this context, to say that racism is not “only about minority races in industrialized nations” (296) is not the same as saying: “[m]odern racism is not really about nonwhites; modern racism is really all about white people” (35). The latter claim has to be read carefully. It is true in the sense that racist representations are about what is abjected from whiteness, what white supremacy oppositionally constructs itself *not* to be; they do not re-present other races but project a counter-image to whiteness. But the claim is false in that it misses the dependence of biopolitical racism on abnormal bodies as targets—nonwhite bodies constituting an exemplary foil in this regard. Racism, in other words, is not just about keeping the white race pure; it is also about keeping other races, and other people, down. It relies on a projective mechanism of aggression and exclusion, as well as internally directed management and control. These two directions require one another, belonging to the same biopolitical movement, but they cannot be reduced to one another. This is because biopolitical racism functions through the tension and asymmetry instituted by its double directionality. The

asymmetries and oppositional differences that it sets up allow for the continued management and division of its “abnormal” populations or targets—holding out the illusory, differential promise of access to normality.

This allows me to return to the question of difference, and to suggest an alternative response to the problem that McWhorter articulates at the end of her book: “if we focus all our energies on our differences—that is, on our specific and distinct identities as queer or black or disabled or whatever—we will fail to perceive any aspect of the power networks that shape our lives other than the narrow face they present to our own group, and that means that we will inevitably fail to understand those power networks at all” (327). I want to suggest that it may be through these very differences that connection and solidarity need to be forged. Difference need not be reified in terms of static “identity”; difference can point to the specificity of experiences and histories of oppression, a specificity that motivates our localized critique and political action. Difference is also relation to, interval between, and distance from. In deepening our understanding of difference, it is this relationality—this interlocking structure of oppressions—that can be revealed. In our abnormality, we are neither constituted, positioned, nor managed in identical ways; appeals to sameness may only serve to alienate in this regard (as McWhorter notes). Indeed, as I have tried to show, abnormal bodies are often positioned and represented oppositionally not only in contrast to normality, but also in relation to other forms of abnormality (for instance, as internal and external threats). To historicize, contextualize and attend to this difference is neither to absolutize nor to elide it; it is to undermine the oppositionality of difference in favor of an understanding of its reciprocal, yet asymmetrical, constitution. It is to reveal the networks of biopower that work through us in differential ways, something that I think McWhorter’s book, in fact, admirably achieves.

Finally, I want to briefly note an aspect of McWhorter’s study that could be supplemented through this attention to difference. In defining biopolitical racism as the project of global white domination, McWhorter rightly includes Anglo-American colonialism, imperialism and nationalism in this project (144, 199, 296-7). But the role of imperialism in white supremacy remains relatively under-developed in the book. One may wonder, for instance, whether it is simply conceived as the logical outcome of white (Nordic) evolutionary, technological and cultural superiority, or whether the colonization of territories and peoples is a tool in the making of that superiority. By attending to the double directionality of biopolitical racism, we may come to understand imperialism as fundamental to the structure of racism. Racism, in its projective and aggressive impetus, is imperialist, just as it is nationalist in its protective movement. The narrow definition of “racism” as discrimination against “minority races in industrialized nations” hides both of these aspects of biopolitical racism. This happens, in part, because racism is accepted at its word and limited to its biological definition. But it is also due to the way in which the historical construction of the nation is taken for granted, forgetting the exclusions and aggressions within and outside the borders of the nation upon which this nationhood was bought. Attending to imperialism as a form of “external” racism may allow us to understand how “racism against the abnormal” again rephrases itself, giving rise to a racism against other (illiberal, intolerable, culturally different) ways of life.¹⁰

References

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¹ I use “biopolitical racism” as shorthand to distinguish the racism, or more accurately white supremacy, described by McWhorter from the narrow definition of “racism” that she criticizes.

² McWhorter traces this to biological and evolutionary discourses on life as process in the 19th century. These enabled “race” to be recast in terms of underlying developmental and physiological processes, which could be normed (110, 199) and which were construed as “arrested” in “inferior races” (137).

³ See pp. 9-11. I should add that I do not think that the book reduces sexuality to race; rather, it contextually situates discourses of sexuality within the scientific racism that shaped and made use of them.

⁴ For the management of female sexuality, both white and nonwhite, in the service of white supremacy, see p. 157. For “sexual difference” construed as a sign of evolutionary development and hence “superior” race, see pp. 183-4.

⁵ Thus the claim that calls to contain “inferior races as well as inferior whites” in the early 20th century could have led to the same treatment for both (167). Yet, in practice, mechanisms of biopolitical racism (e.g. racial segregation, institutionalization and sterilization) differed based on other factors (214-217).

⁶ Fanon 1967, 116.

⁷ See McWhorter on the historical construction of the white “lesbian brain” as similar to brains of males of lower races (187).

⁸ This might allow us to interpret all abnormality to be “internal,” and to give a positive reading to Foucault’s “internal racism.” But my worry about directionality remains.

⁹ My argument is twofold. (1) The structure of inner-outer threat and the protective-projective directionalities of racism are inherent to its operation. (2) Though no one group timelessly forms the “outside,” nonwhite bodies have been historically exemplary of this positionality, due to the naturalization of their “outsider” status as visible bodily difference.

¹⁰ Thus biopolitical racism deploys the naturalized “desire for human perfection or social progress” (298) against abnormality, culturally defined. White normality is hence also “Western.” Curiously, sexuality continues to be used as a means of racialization but with a twist; other cultures are seen as essentially sexist, gender oppressive, or homophobic and hence as unprogressive and inferior.