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Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy

A review

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Ladelle McWhorter's *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* is exceptional and provocative. The text is well researched and written and it is obvious to the reader that the author put a lot of time, effort, thought, and work into the project. McWhorter offers a very careful and nuanced genealogy of race wars, racism, modern racism, and scientific racism in Anglo-America. In this regard, she avoids the pitfall of rushing through the "race stuff" in an effort to get to the (at times assumed to be more important and significant) "sexual oppression stuff." By which I mean that McWhorter does not follow the lead of many white feminists who use racism as an analogy for sexism without regard for the historical and contemporary significance of racism. She

painstakingly contextualizes the history of race and racism in Anglo-America. Therefore, my comments will not focus on the incredible detail about the genealogy of race and racism offered in the bulk of the text.¹ Rather, I want to give attention to the overarching argument of the text concerning the relationship between racism and sexual oppression. In particular, I problematize the equating of heterosexism/sexual oppression with racism/racial oppression. For McWhorter, there is no way to rush through the "race stuff" to get to the "sexual oppression stuff" because it is all the "same stuff."

While reading the text, I vacillated about whether the connections drawn between racism and sexual oppression are overstated in ways that undermine important distinctions. At first glance, I thought my apprehension was about how readers may use this work rather than with McWhorter's project and argument.² But upon further reflection, I am also unsettled by what McWhorter is arguing, not just how others might maliciously use her arguments.³ In what follows, I begin by disclosing concerns that I had going into reading the book (namely, my own suspicions about appropriating analogies) that were not assuaged when I finished reading it. Having said that, I offer a brief discussion of the "two great dangers" identified by McWhorter before analyzing appropriating analogies and then taking on the thrust of McWhorter's argument.

The text commences in the Introduction, "Two Great Dangers," with the tragic and brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, which is compared to the murder of Emmitt Till. At the outset I am leery about this neat comparison between Shepard and Till—even with the slight caveat that race is an "obviously important difference" between the two victims (9). I also wonder if McWhorter is overstating the "greatest similarity" between them as a refusal "to hide or apologize for their sexuality."⁴ I am considering whether this

interpretation of and speculation about Till's actions is a repetition of a certain way of hyper-sexualizing black males (even as young as 14 years old). Overall, I share the sentiments of the African American and gay Binghamton graduate student McWhorter mentions, who "was insistent that white gay and lesbian people...must ever be mindful of the differences between antiblack racism and heterosexism. Even when there are parallels...the differences are still enormous, and it is a mistake as well as an insult to all African Americans to ever forget them" (9).

It is this point that brings us to McWhorter's dilemma, identified by her as two great dangers: first, the danger of erasure – seeing all oppressions as the same. And second is the danger of isolation – maintaining radical distinctions that prevent alliances (10). In a sense, this book presents McWhorter's account of why she is ultimately privileging the second danger above the first. But I see things from a different perspective. I share concerns about the first danger (erasure, loss of particularity, etc.). However, I am skeptical and perhaps even cynical about alliances that may form to counter mutual networks of power, particularly when race, and specifically *blackness*, is factored into the equation. Too often white women have chosen white supremacy over multi-racial women's alliances (e.g., excluding women of color from women's organizations). Too often white laborers have chosen white supremacy over multi-racial working-class alliances (e.g., excluding people of color from labor unions). Too often white gay men and lesbian women have forgotten the problem of anti-black racism and/or ignored the fact that there are people of color who are also gay men and lesbian women.

These issues are articulated in part by McWhorter in the text. For example, in the first chapter "Racism, Race, Race War: In Search of Conceptual History" she writes:

Most white gay men and lesbians were not nearly as committed to ending racism as activists of color, straight and gay, were committed to ending heterosexism; in fact, some whites were quite entrenched in their racist animosity even towards fellow gay men and lesbians (18).

[She adds:] White gay men and lesbians might not be fighting racism in huge numbers, but straight African Americans seemed like solid allies in the fight against heterosexism. In such a climate, erroneous as the assumptions that generated it may have been, white gay men and lesbians didn't hesitate to draw on the strategies, symbols, and rhetoric of the black civil rights movement both for inspiration and for organizing techniques (19).

With this in mind, I offer the following questions. Who is the beneficiary of this comparison and at whose expense are the comparisons made? Who is alienated and erased? Who gains or loses alliances? Who is appropriated and then ignored? Or, to put it another way, what do white gay men and lesbian women gain from this comparison and what do black people of any sexual orientation gain (or potentially lose) from it? How might white gay men and lesbian women appropriate the theoretical framework of anti-black racism to make the case (as McWhorter does) that sexual oppression *is* racism while simultaneously ignoring the problem of anti-black racism?

There are two appropriating analogies that have long given me pause: 1) the race/gender analogy (in which white women have used slavery and anti-black racial oppression as an analogy for gender oppression); and 2) the civil rights/gay rights analogy (in which white gay men and lesbian women have used anti-black racism as an analogy for heterosexism and homophobia). My concern in both cases is that many

white people (whether heterosexual white women or gay and lesbian Whites) have appropriated the rhetoric of “Black” movements, i.e., anti-racist movements and fights for equal rights for Blacks, without any stated or demonstrated commitments to these movements.

The loose usage of institutionalized and racialized slavery and anti-black racism as an analogy for other forms of oppression proves to be problematic. For example, the race/gender analogy is frequently appropriated to support members of groups and their causes even when those groups are often themselves participating in or complicit with some form of anti-black racism. The civil rights/gay rights analogy often implies that black men and women are all heterosexual while simultaneously constructing homosexuality as white. The analogy ignores the ways in which black gay men and lesbian women experience “sexual oppression” differently because of the added burden of inter- and intra-racial heterosexism and homophobia coupled with anti-black racism.⁵ Part of what gets lost in the race/gender analogy are the multilayered experiences of women of color who confront both racism and sexism simultaneously. Part of what gets lost in the civil rights/gay rights analogy are the multilayered experiences of gay and lesbian people of color who confront both racism and heterosexism (not heterosexism as a form of racism) simultaneously.

But let us be clear, McWhorter’s project is not simply to draw an analogy between “racism” and “sexual oppression.” I do not want to reduce her work to appropriating analogies because her project goes far beyond, and has wider-ranging implications than, mere analogizing. McWhorter seeks to demonstrate how “these things [racism and sexual oppression, or sexual oppression as a form of racism] are joined together, part of the same matrix of power, employing the same means, serving the same aims, shaping the same lives” (11). And while she “did not want to conflate racism

with other forms of oppression” (33) McWhorter decides (with Foucault) that “it does make good historical, analytic, and in some contexts even political strategic sense to use the term racism to name the much larger phenomenon and not just the part of it that applies directly to people of color or Jews” (35).

McWhorter agrees with Foucault that racism is racism against the abnormal (42), but offers some interventions to his “Society Must Be Defended” lectures. “One crucial adjustment is that, in my story, race becomes a matter of morphology – physical appearance – several decades before it becomes a matter of biology” (61). In the end, the genealogy offered is used to buttress Foucault’s claim. In the penultimate chapter McWhorter argues that, if we use the term racism “to name a shifting tradition of white supremacist political strategies stretching from about 1700 to the present...I believe this long genealogy has shown that Foucault is right: contemporary racism, the racism that arose in the twentieth century as heir to scientific racism and racist eugenics, is racism against the abnormal” (291). McWhorter continues this line in the seventh chapter “(Counter) Remembering Racism,” where she asserts: “Scientific racism was not just an attempt on the part of some scientists...to justify the oppression of people of color. It was a set of scientific theories, disciplinary practices, and social and political institutions that projected and attempted to realize a program of human perfection in evolutionary biological terms by purging the human species – the Race – of defect, deviance, and disease” (297).

My reservations about the guiding argument of the text are manifold. McWhorter presents a meticulous genealogy of race and racism in its myriad manifestations going back to the 1700s. And yet even with the weight of all of this research that demonstrates the specificity of anti-black racism, she still opts to qualify racism as racism against the abnormal

(broadly construed). While I am sympathetic to an argument that racism and sexual oppression are interlocking systems of oppression, or are systems of oppression that inform, impact, and reinforce one another, I reject the argument that the term “racism” is applicable to sexual oppression (specifically sexual oppression against white heterosexual women and white gay men and lesbian women). McWhorter might dismiss this position as “identity politics” or an attempt on my part to lay claim to a “‘special right’ of a unique victimization” (327). But in our present social and political climate black people (whether one is the president of the United States or any other black person) are no longer allowed to name the oppression we experience “anti-black racism.” All the while, white right-wing conservatives, liberals, and many in-between comfortably make claims that they are the victims of “reverse-racism,” “reverse-racial discrimination,” or “racism against the abnormal.” McWhorter’s text may be an attempt to complicate—or certainly trouble—the term “racism,” but it also serves to reinforce the continued devaluation, not just revaluation, and dilution of the concept of anti-back racism. For white gay men and lesbian women (from 1700 until today), might it be the case that before they were the victims of what Foucault and McWhorter describe as “racism against the abnormal” they were or are its accomplices—against blackness as abnormal?

References

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¹ While my comments on McWhorter’s text will emphasize the first and seventh chapters of her book, I would like to note that this equivocation operates in chapters four through six as well. Chapter four attempts to show “How the figure of the homosexual arose within the same racist scientific discourses and science-influenced social practices and...the close kinship between the myths of the black rapist and the homosexual predator” (143). In chapter five she explains: “If sexuality lay at the foundation of the family, morality, and civil society, then the problem with inferior races – evident in their generally acknowledged failure to maintain stable family life, abide by clear standards of morality, and govern themselves – was a problem of their sexuality. Racial difference, thus, was sexual difference” (201). And in chapter six McWhorter argues that the pro-family movement was racist because “it promoted The Family, a twentieth century Nordic supremacist fabrication, to the exclusion and degradation of any alternative form of life...No one would dispute the claim that pro-family movements have worked against queer people...Pro-family groups do not proudly proclaim their animosity toward racial minorities, so it may be less obvious to some that promotion of The Family is racist. However, not only in its perhaps unconscious perpetuation of white supremacy and the project of Anglo-Saxon world domination but also in its direct material effects, it is racist” (286-7).

² For example, how might a person disinterested in confronting racism and/or sexual oppression appropriate these arguments to make the case, following McWhorter’s lead, that basically everything is racism. And when everything is racism, then nothing really is racism.

³ Of course, unsettling the reader is certainly one of her aims.

⁴ Although Shepard may have looked like a 13 year old, he was actually 21 years old. It is Till who was only 14 years old and I puzzle over whether we ought to read into Till's actions a public affirmation and assertion of sexuality. Is it appropriate to say that Till "knowing he was about to die, he refused to give Bryant and Milam the satisfaction they would have obtained if he had debased himself and denied his manhood" (8)?

⁵ Also referred to as the "miscegenation analogy." See Mumford 2005. See also Carbado 2000.