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Revealing and Concealing

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

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How should we think about the relationship between homophobia and racism? There are obvious surface similarities. Both gays and lesbians and African-Americans face discrimination: they can be denied housing or employment because of their sexual orientation or their race. Both groups find themselves misrepresented by demeaning stereotypes in films, television, and literature. But most would agree that racism and homophobia are not the *same*. Racism and homophobia target different identities and have different historical origins, different degrees of impact, and important differences in how they should be resisted. Even if African Americans and gays and lesbians experience some similar effects of oppression, the origin, function, and

purpose of these is different in theoretically and pragmatically important ways.

We can place two well known analyses side by side and see this difference: Charles Mill's theory of the Racial Contract, and Cheshire Calhoun's view of heterosexism as displacement. Mills describes racial oppression as the political system of White Supremacy: an exclusionary domination contract on the part of one group (the "Whites") to exploit another (the non-whites). This Racial Contract has taken many forms over the last several hundred years, beginning with slavery, colonization, and genocide, and racial oppression today is its continuing legacy in new forms. In contrast, Calhoun depicts homophobia as *displacement*: it displaces gays and lesbians from both the public and private spheres in order to maintain the pre-political status of family and the special form of humanity and citizenship that participation in family life grants. Thus while surface features of racism and homophobia might *appear* congruent, the realities behind these surface features are not, and the incongruences are significant for understanding and combating the two systems: racism functions primarily to exploit, homophobia to displace. The visible morphology of race provides a shifting set of criteria for the exploitation of one group by another, while homophobic displacement consigns a second group to the invisibility of the closet for the purposes of constructing a myth about the requirements of political citizenship.

Despite these differences between racism and homophobia, there is significant *intersection* between them. As has been well detailed, people can experience both forms of oppression in ways that are not reducible simply to the additive effects of each separate system. There are black gays and lesbians who experience neither their "blackness" nor their "gayness" as separate forms of oppression, but as a specific constellation of effects having to do with the way their social location impacts

their lives. Part of this specificity comes from the way that gays and lesbians experience homophobia both inside of and outside of their own racial communities. If racism and homophobia are separate and incongruent systems, how can theories that detail only one or the other be used to understand the experiences of someone who lives under the combined effects of both? Wouldn't an analysis that combines them be more revealing?

If we turn to McWhorter's *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*, it appears that the answer to this question is both yes and no. Yes—because the linkages between racism and homophobia are deeper and more complex than we might have imagined. No—because these linkages may not help us to understand the specific situation of somebody who experiences both racism and homophobia.

McWhorter begins by taking literally Foucault's controversial claim (at the close of *Abnormal*) that the new racism of the twentieth century was not “ethnic racism” but rather “racism against the abnormal”—racism that neutralizes anything that threatens the white group. To understand this claim, she follows people like Mills and Bell Hooks and views twentieth century racism against minorities as *white supremacy*: the beliefs, practices, and institutions that establish and maintain the material and cultural superiority of the so-called white (or Nordic) races over and against non-white races. However, by showing the centrality of maintaining the purity and health of this white race to the project of white supremacy, McWhorter also shows how white supremacy results in the policing, marking and controlling of seemingly non-racial threats to the white group. Thus *queers*—a broad category that includes perverts, homosexuals, feminists, and other familiar “monsters” of the twentieth and twenty-first century—experience homophobia and identity control as a result of the same white supremacy that marks racial others. From this viewpoint, homophobia and racism are not separate forms of

oppression; rather they are parts of a single biopolitical deployment. In Anglo-America, the primary vehicle of this deployment was the eugenics movement, though McWhorter's genealogy is not so narrow as to deny that both homophobia and racism have other sources and other functions.

I am sympathetic to this approach. After I finished writing *Ambiguity and Sexuality*, I started researching the homophobia of the American Christian Right. At the same time, I was reading the recently translated Foucault lectures (including *Abnormal*). Even though the Christian Right literature lacked any explicit racial prejudice and even reached out to include racial minorities, I felt that there was something both *racial* and *racist* in their homophobia, beyond the obvious fact that the Christian Right is composed mostly of white folks. All the talk about The Family and purity sounded just like the extreme White Supremacist literature, but the only visible connection between the two was the quasi-fascist practice of defending a thoroughly made-up historical reality: the purity and sanctity of The Family in one case, the purity and sanctity of The White Race in the other. I could almost *feel*—or to be Nietzschean—*smell* the connection, but even with Foucault's investigations making that smell more pungent, my research failed to finally locate it. McWhorter exposes it all too clearly: The Family and so-called Christian “family values” are the genealogical descendents of white supremacy and its eugenic mission to purify the “Nordic” race of all its threats—perverts, feminists, degenerate races—all those contagions that would destroy it and drag it back to a less civilized state.

Although I am glad to have that answer provided, and in such grand, illuminating and meticulous detail, I still find these genealogical linkages as problematic as they are fruitful. Because she practices genealogy, she reveals connections without turning them into a *system*, in the way that, for example, Marxist analysis makes capitalism a system, or even

in the way that Mills makes white supremacy a political system. So, while it would be wrong to argue that she sees racism and homophobia as congruent or parallel systems, it would be equally incorrect to interpret the claim that they form a biopolitical *dispositif* as the claim that they form a single system. She exposes links and reveals contingencies and explodes our ordinary conceptions of racism. She does not build a system.

An approach like hers has the power to reveal links between disparate accounts such as those of Calhoun and Mills. If heterosexuality and family life provide the pre-political condition for civil membership, then it should hardly surprise us that this condition for civil membership is white supremacist in its historical development and deployment. It remains white in many important ways (consider the continuing attack on the purportedly dysfunctional or strange family structures of African Americans, Latinos, and Asians). Conversely, the Racial Contract includes a “family clause” to the effect that heterosexuality and its implied “marriageability” are necessary pre-political conditions for entering into the domination contract. Those who agree to define themselves as white in forming the contract require normative heterosexuality as a necessary condition of this whiteness. Racism directed against racial minorities and racism directed against the abnormal result from the inherently exclusionary practices of constructing polities around what Mills helpfully calls “domination contracts.” To recognize racial minorities as beings fully equal to those defined by the Racial Contract as white destroys white supremacy, conceptually and practically. To “drop the borders” around the normalcy that protects the white family also destroys white supremacy, although it destroys it from within by including the “pollution” of homosexuals, perverts, feminists, and other deviants.

McWhorter's analysis reveals these connections not just because of its content, but also because of its method. In terms of content, shifting from thinking about racism to white supremacy provides superior analytic power for understanding racism against races and against the *abnormal*. In terms of method, genealogy shows us how to reveal this intertwining and connection without worrying about the question of which is first or fundamental. The spreading out of explanation, the denial of singular explanations, is essential to the entire genealogical enterprise. Her book exhorts us to understand the specific constellation of domination effects we find ourselves under, while giving up on the dream of the grand unified theory of domination. The mental cramp I once felt about how to think these two systems together is gone.

My reason for doubting this approach is not that it is too “freewheeling” – that by abandoning system it sacrifices rigor of analysis for the fun of saying whatever we want. Her genealogy, at least, is careful, thoughtful, and researched. However any genealogy, as an interpretation, necessarily covers as much as it reveals, and my doubt concerns what this particular genealogy hides – homophobia directed against members of non-white races *by* members of non-white races. In fact, it might do even more than merely hide this homophobia; it might make such homophobia conceptually impossible. *If* homophobia is a genealogical descendent of white supremacy, if in fact racism is always about “threats to racial purity” (35) and this includes homophobia, then homophobia directed by non-whites against other non-whites cannot be thought because homophobia is, almost by definition, *white supremacy*. It turns out that this analytic scheme is no more helpful, and is perhaps even harmful, to those who experience *both* racism and homophobia, since intra-racial homophobia is part of the unique constellation of being both racially and sexually oppressed and this part of the constellation cannot be seen from this viewpoint.

As a criticism, this seems at once sharply pointed and yet too easy to make. The homophobia of non-white peoples is mostly absent from the book, except during the opening and closing discussions of whether homophobia and racism are congruent, separate or part of one process. Even in those discussions, homophobia is curiously “un-raced”—I kept asking *who* is homophobic, and towards *whom*? Mostly the discussion makes racism look like something white people do to racial others, but makes homophobia look like something that happens to everybody who is abnormal. But of course things are far more complex.

However, if we want to continue to think *with* McWhorter, we might think that such a criticism is too easy. I'd like to close this response with two possible answers we might make to this question of non-white homophobia that are in the spirit of her work. (1) What matters is *racial purity*, such that each race tries to neutralize threats and contagions to its own purity. This could then be understood either as an imitation of white supremacist biopolitics by non-white races, or as a more directed attempt to maintain the purity of the subjugated race in a bid to win an updated race war. Effects of this second possibility would then be seen in sexism and homophobia within racially oppressed communities as an attempt to maintain and carry on the race in the face of racist threats. (2) The *dispositif* of biopower as it targets sexual abnormalities is simply “bigger” than individual races—the fight against the abnormal spreads like a rhizome through the whole of the social body and can emerge anywhere. This response has the effect of again separating racism from homophobia, by arguing for other “forms” of homophobia, but if we are staying with genealogy, this answer simply points out that our task is not to lump everything together, but to split things apart and understand their functioning up close. Non-white homophobia might have its own functioning that we simply must understand in its own terms. This seems like a response that in fact takes away some of

McWhorter's hard-earned insights, but it is only appropriate that one genealogy be merely an invitation to further genealogy.

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