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Racism, Normalization, and Genealogy-Based Politics

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

SHANNON SULLIVAN

Department of Philosophy
Penn State University
240 Sparks Building
University Park, PA 16802
sws10@psu.edu

In *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (2009), Ladelle McWhorter develops what she calls a "genealogy-based" politics, in contrast to identity-based politics (328). McWhorter's objection to identity politics is that it tends to draw sharp boundaries between different groups, creating oppositions between them and treating their experiences with oppression as isolated from one another (15, 327-28). Rather than focusing on identity—even intersectional identities—a genealogy-based politics examines the transformations of power networks that constitute the complex subjects on which they operate. More specifically, the genealogy-based politics developed in this provocative

and compelling book examines biopolitical power networks that discipline and police bodies in the name of normality.

McWhorter focuses on the normalizing practices of racism and sexual oppression, arguing that they cannot be understood apart from one another. This is because "race and sexuality are not merely mutually influential. They are historically codependent and mutually determinative" (14). In my remarks here, I will examine this codependency and ask whether it unintentionally collapses sexual oppression into racism. My concern is that, following Michel Foucault, McWhorter risks over-expanding the concept of racism and thus eclipsing the particularity of sexual oppression. While I agree with McWhorter's persuasive analysis of the mutually determinative and historically codependent relationship between race and sexuality, I worry that Foucault's (re)definition of racism ultimately doesn't do justice to the complexity of McWhorter's account. Put another way, while I agree that race and sexuality are codependent, I want to make sure that this codependency preserves the distinctiveness of race and sexuality within their mutual determination.

As my emphasis on distinctiveness suggests, I am not necessarily opposed to identity politics, and this perhaps is because I conceive identity politics differently than McWhorter does. For McWhorter, the danger of pursuing identity politics without genealogy politics is that of establishing separate groups who are competing to see who can count as normal. And the only way anyone can win the normality game is to sharply disassociate themselves from those who count as abnormal. Attempting to get members of any particular identity group to be seen as normal—even by means of broadening the prevailing concept of normality—perpetuates rather than challenges disciplinary normalization. On McWhorter's account, this is to say that striving for normality perpetuates, rather than challenges *racism*. With Foucault, McWhorter equates "biopolitical" and

“racist” (most explicitly on page 326) and defines modern racism as racism against the abnormal. This means that while race plays a key role in the definition and operations of racism, “not all the targets of racist practices are members of currently recognized racial minorities” (42). As I read this claim, it means that a white gay man, like Matthew Shepard, who was beaten and killed because of his sexuality, would be considered a victim of racism. Along Foucauldian lines, we would say that while Shepard was not a member of a currently recognized racial minority, he was the target of a racist practice that brought about his death.

I’ve never quite known what to make of Foucault’s definition of modern racism, and so I felt relieved when I read McWhorter’s confession that she initially was embarrassed by Foucault’s claim. This meant that my confusion wasn’t (simply) a matter of my philosophical inadequacy: here was an expert Foucault scholar who also wondered about his definition of racism! And I also was grateful for McWhorter’s explanation of the definition via Foucault’s analysis of normalization. It has persuaded me that Foucault’s claim isn’t simplistic or careless, and I agree with McWhorter that modern racism cannot be understood apart from quests for purity and perfection that would eliminate all abnormality, defect, or deviance.

Where I found the claim most compelling was in McWhorter’s chapter on the family (chapter six). There McWhorter explains that white middle-class feminists and white middle-class homosexuals were (are) considered race traitors because they aren’t producing white babies, which are needed to keep the white race going. (Lower class white people also might not be producing white babies, but that doesn’t matter as much from the perspective of white supremacy – in fact, it can be good – since they are considered inferior stock that shouldn’t be reproducing anyway.) These examples show that (hetero)sexuality and white racial

superiority are intimately related: what white people do with their sexual lives deeply matters to white supremacy. White supremacy’s concern with race and sexuality often takes the form of prohibiting “miscegenation,” or breeding between white and non-white races. But the interesting thing about modern racism as explained by McWhorter is that even if a white lesbian is partnered with a white woman, not a person of color, she is a race traitor. More pointedly, even if a white heterosexual woman is married to and having sex with a white man, if she refuses to bear children, she can be considered a race traitor. The negative injunction of modern racism – don’t produce mixed race or non-white babies – is not enough to fully buttress white supremacy, in other words. The positive injunction to produce white babies also is needed to demonstrate loyalty to the white race.

When I return to the case of Matthew Shepard, however, I find myself reluctant to call him a victim of racism. A victim of a horrifically violent attempt to eliminate so-called sexual abnormality – yes. A victim of an outrageous instance of disciplinary normalization in quest of sexual purity and perfection – yes. And a victim of a quest for sexual purity that cannot be understood apart from the white supremacist bourgeois family – yes. But racism – no, or at least not quite. This is not to restrict the term “racism” to the 1936 definition, which narrowly associated racism with scientific racism leading up to the Nazi era. I agree with McWhorter in more broadly defining racism as “a shifting tradition of white supremacist political strategies stretching from about 1700 to the present” (291). White supremacy has to police white people too, not just people of color, to make sure that white people are upholding and reproducing (literally and metaphorically) whiteness. White people clearly can be and often are the focus of white supremacist disciplinary practices.

But this isn't the same thing as saying that modern racism is racism against the abnormal, and here I worry that Foucault's transformation of the term "racism" ultimately undercuts the complexity of McWhorter's approach to race and sexuality. I think that more accurate and helpful than defining modern racism as racism against the abnormal is to say that modern racism is an oppressive biopolitical power network that operates against a particular set of "abnormal" people, those who are considered non-white. This network also operates against other sets of "abnormal" people, such as homosexuals, and when that happens, we call it sexual oppression. (And other examples abound, such as the constitution of the disabled through the normalization of ability.) Racism and sexual oppression are instances of the same quest for purity that disciplines in the name of normality, in other words. This means it is accurate to say that racism is oppression of the abnormal, as is sexual oppression. But sexual oppression wouldn't necessarily be an instance of racism, as Foucault's definition suggests, even though sexual oppression operates with many of the same techniques and concerns that racism does because they are both normalizing disciplines implicated in one another.

I'm not trying to be precise here for precision's sake. Nor do I wish to seem cantankerous by driving a wedge between McWhorter and Foucault, especially since that wedge speaks in favor of McWhorter's account. I press the point because it seems that something important is lost when using the term "racism" as a synonym for the broader concept of biopolitical networks of disciplinary normalization ("normalization" for short). Take the example of a gay black man who is brutally beaten and killed by two white men who pose as gay men to lure the black man away from a bar – that is, take the example of a case like Matthew Shepard's, except that the victim is black. I think we need some way to distinguish or at least ask questions about what happened to each of them and the way that their different races might have played a role in their

assaults and deaths. I'm concerned that the ability to ask those questions and make those distinctions is lost if we say that both the gay white man and the gay black man are victims of racism. Again, this is not because I want to restrict "racism" to its early-twentieth century usage. But there are multiple ways to shift the term's meaning, and I think that Foucault's particular way risks enlarging the term beyond what is most useful for feminist and anti-racist purposes.

It's true, speaking on Foucault's behalf, that because they were gay, both men "failed" to live normal white lives that would reproduce the white race, and so, on white supremacist standards, both "deserved" violent punishment. But they failed in different ways because of their different races, and I'm not sure that Foucault's equation of racism and normalization adequately captures that difference. For example, Shepard's failure could be especially insulting to white supremacy because, being white, he could father white babies if he chose to do so. This suggestion does not overlook the intense hatred that Shepard's murderers had for gay people or reduce their hatred to a single-minded or conscious focus on Shepard's reproductive life. But it does claim that Shepard's whiteness was bound up in the "offensiveness" of his refusal to engage in reproductive intercourse.

In contrast, because of his race, a gay black man never had the option of producing white babies, and so his reproductive "failure" might be less of a threat to white supremacy. As long as a black man reproduces with a black woman and doesn't "taint" the babies that a white woman would otherwise produce, his reproductive "failure" is less of an affront to white supremacy than that of a white gay man. The best scenario of all (from a white supremacist perspective) would seem to be for a black man to be gay, since his homosexuality would mean he is not contributing to the rising tide of non-white populations in the United States and elsewhere. The same would hold true for black women as

lesbians. (This line of speculation makes me wonder if more white gay people are beaten up and killed by other white people because of their sexuality than are black gay people. Not that a person's race and sexuality can be neatly separated to determine which is the "real" cause of an assault, but I doubt that white attackers tend to preface their attacks of black gay people with taunts like "Guess what? We're not gay. You're going to get jacked. It's gay awareness week," as Shepard's killers did [quoted in McWhorter 2009, 1].) My point is that while white supremacist demands for the reproduction of the white race conceivably played a role in Shepard's death, he seems to have been punished for his sexual orientation, not his race. To be sure, his race was a constitutive factor in his attack, but in different ways than it would be for a black gay man. From a white supremacist perspective, Shepard's whiteness was a good thing deserving of praise, not punishment, and this is *precisely why* his homosexuality was so problematic. The same thing cannot be said for my hypothetical gay black man. His race is not a good thing from a white supremacist perspective, which alters the meaning and effect of his sexual orientation. Because he is black, his homosexuality is less problematic from a reproductive point of view, which suggests that it is his race, more than his sexuality, that makes him "deserving" of punishment.

Have these speculations led me away from genealogical politics and toward identity politics? No and yes, I would say respectively and simultaneously, since I don't think that genealogical politics and identity politics necessarily conflict. Let me be clear that I agree with McWhorter's rejection of isolated, atomistic conceptions of identity, and I find her criticism of intersexuality compelling. I also am sympathetic to her emphasis on institutions, discourses, and disciplinary regimes, and I am persuaded by her argument that focusing only on differences between different groups undermines our ability to perceive the power networks that shape all of our

lives (327). But I don't think that identity politics necessarily assumes atomistic conceptions of identity. I would add that institutions, discourses, and disciplinary regimes are precisely what one has to consider if one's going to understand how identities are constituted, and thus genealogy and identity aren't necessarily in tension with one another. I also would agree with Linda Martín Alcoff that "strongly felt identities *in reality* do not uniformly lead to the political disasters [of separatism] the critics portend" (2006, 41; emphasis in original). A person can strongly identify as white and female, for example, and not have her race and gender pit her against people of color and males. A politics that is attuned to people's lived identities can grapple with their distinctiveness without drawing sharp, impermeable boundaries between them (see, e.g., Sullivan 2001, especially chapter one).

In the end, the concerns I have voiced here might boil down to a relatively simple question directed more to Foucault than to McWhorter: isn't "racism" better understood as a metonym for "normalization," rather than a synonym? That is, isn't "racism" intimately related to and a constitutive part of "normalization," but not exhaustive of it? And if so, what perhaps is lost in terms of potential political effectiveness against disciplinary normalization by treating the relationship as one of synonymy rather than metonymy?¹

References

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Shannon Sullivan

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