

REVIEW ESSAY

The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections. By LICIA CARLSON. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.

Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy. By LADELLE MCWHORTER. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.

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Genealogy, the technique of investigation that Michel Foucault introduced in his late writings on the modern prison and the history of sexuality, is one of the most fruitful means by which to demonstrate the mutable character of putatively necessary forms of rationality and allegedly natural human capacities and characteristics. Foucault regarded genealogy as “the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today” (83). Genealogies require the excavation and articulation of subjugated knowledges, knowledges that “have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (Foucault 1980, 83, 82). Foucault maintained that it is through the re-emergence of these subjugated knowledges that criticism performs its work.

Foucault once remarked that although many people misconstrued his work, understanding it to be centrally concerned with power, he himself regarded inquiry into “the constitution of subjects” (how humans are made subject) as the crux of his theoretical endeavors (Foucault 1982, 209). In some places, he described his genealogical approach to the constitution of subjects as an “historical ontology of ourselves.” As a kind of genealogy, historical ontologies excavate subjugated knowledges, social discourses, and institutional practices of the past in order to discern how those knowledges and practices have molded the self-understandings and self-perceptions we hold in the present. In another context, I have argued that disability theorists should engage in this form of historical inquiry in order to articulate the disciplinary character of “disability identity” and the ways that disability is naturalized as impairment. I also asserted that the critical question that disability theorists involved in the practice of historical

ontology should ask (as did Foucault) is this: Of that which is given to us as universal, necessary, and obligatory, how much of it is occupied by the singular, the contingent, the product of arbitrary constraints (Tremain 2001, 635-6)?

In *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections*, Licia Carlson responds to exactly this question, a feature that helps to distinguish her book from earlier work in the area. One example of this distinction is that her examination of the history of intellectual disability is conducted through exploration of a series of contradictions—"conceptual pairs"—inspired by Foucault that, she claims, have defined intellectual disability as an object of knowledge and have conferred stability upon the classifications of intellectual disability around which a great deal of that knowledge has been formulated, enabling the classifications to persist. These conceptual pairs—qualitative/quantitative, organic/non-organic, static/dynamic, visible/invisible—are explored in the first part of the book, and their exploration as contradictions or "unresolved tensions" in the history of intellectual disability puts in place a framework within which discussions in the second part of the book take place (13, 23).

Carlson goes to some length to show that these conceptual pairs are not specters of days gone by, however, for they can also be found in contemporary philosophical discourses about intellectual disability. Hence, a second key feature of Carlson's book that sets it apart from the work of other authors is her scrutiny of the ways in which philosophers have laid claim to knowledge about intellectual disability. Indeed, Carlson explains that her two main objectives in writing the book were: first, to situate philosophical discussion about intellectual disability (in various moments in the history of philosophy and in assorted philosophical traditions) explicitly in the history of intellectual disability itself; and second, to reveal certain features of contemporary philosophical discourse about intellectually disabled people. Carlson notes that, in many cases, intellectually disabled people appear in moral discourse as examples that support arguments not directly applicable to them. In these cases, intellectually disabled people serve an "extra-theoretical function," namely, as "disembodied thought-experiments through which philosophers may tease out the intricacies of their conceptual and normative positions" (11). Carlson's expressed aims are to refute a number of the assumptions and claims on which such positions rest and to show that philosophers must rethink their philosophies on intellectual disability in ways that open up spaces for the consideration of new philosophical questions about intellectual disability, including questions the answers to which "allow a fuller portrait of persons with intellectual disabilities as human *subjects* to emerge" (17; emphasis in Carlson).

A third and final distinctive feature of Carlson's book is that it introduces an analysis of the significance of gender within the history of intellectual disability (an analysis missing from the earlier work) by considering, among other things, the various functions and roles of women within, and in relation to, the institutions

that at one time housed large numbers of intellectually disabled people. As Carlson shows, for instance, the classifications used to identify intellectually disabled women within these institutions, the roles they were made to assume, the responsibilities assigned to some of them (including responsibility for the care and grooming of younger institutionalized girls and boys), and whether and what form of training was made available to them, were substantially conditioned by prevalent stereotypes about women that circulated *beyond* the institution: women as helpers, caregivers, nurturers, passive, docile, sexually deviant, and so on (57–75). Furthermore, the looping-effect of these practices entailed that the self-understandings and self-perceptions of these institutionalized women, that is, their constitution as subjects of intellectual disability, went hand-in-hand with the articulation of the shifting classifications themselves.

Carlson's Foucauldian analysis of intellectual disability is a sophisticated addition to an area of disability studies and philosophy of disability that has received little critical attention. However, in light of Carlson's evident familiarity with, and understanding of, a broad range of Foucault's writings and her creative application of many of his central ideas, it is puzzling, to me at least, that his claims about a type of power he called "biopower" have not been explicitly incorporated into her analysis in the book. This is especially puzzling because Foucault's claims about biopower are without a doubt among the most important tools he provides to philosophers and theorists of disability. They are tools that explain how practices of normalization and discipline—including practices of classification and stratification, partitioning and segregation (all of which Carlson discusses)—emerged, becoming organizing principles and central concerns of public policy in general, employed to circumscribe the category of intellectual disability for once and for all and to corral large numbers of people assigned to it in particular. In short, without the explanation of the widespread emergence, interrelatedness, interconnectedness, and mutually supporting character of these practices that Foucault's claims about biopower, when taken together, provide, the critical reach of Carlson's historical ontology does not, and perhaps cannot, extend as far as it should. For this kind of account of the significance of biopower for the history of intellectual disability, we must therefore turn to Ladelle McWhorter's analysis of "racism against the abnormal."

In *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy*, McWhorter adeptly employs Foucault's technique of genealogy in order to trace the heritage of the notion of race bequeathed to contemporary Americans through scientific, quasi-scientific, medical, and juridical discourses from the early eighteenth century to the present and the inextricable linkage between that heritage and the emergence of sexuality in biopolitical and eugenic discourses on the family and the scientific management of sexualized populations. She charts this heritage by weaving together insights drawn from erudite academic and archival material, articles in the popular press, and the subjugated knowledges of community

organizers, neighbors, and activists. Importantly, McWhorter argues that the book should not be regarded as simply an additional contribution to the substantial body of feminist literature that assumes an “intersectional approach” to racism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression. She asserts that whereas intersectional approaches tend to approach forms of oppression in terms of the identities they generate, the arguments of her book are concerned with the networks of power, discursive practices, and institutions that create the very conditions for the possibility of these identities. In particular, McWhorter endorses and elaborates the rather surprising remarks Foucault made in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, according to which biopolitical networks of power produced sexuality in the service of race, and his even more surprising and provocative claims about a “racism against the abnormal” in a lecture course he gave at the Collège de France in 1975–1976.

In the lecture course of 1975–1976 (later published as “*Society Must be Defended*” [Foucault 1997/2003]), Foucault described this racism against the abnormal as a racism not preoccupied with attacking members of another race, but rather with protecting the boundaries of *the* race, the only race that matters, the human race embodied in its “highest” representatives (McWhorter, 139–40). For Foucault, the networks of power that comprise what in the present day is aptly called racism aim to eliminate, contain, manage, or exploit abnormality in ways that threaten, harm, and oppress the people who come to be classified as abnormal. Modern racism is a set of power relations that produces effects we call anti-Semitism and white supremacy; however, what is at issue in modern racist regimes of power is not religion or skin color *per se*, but rather whether one is normal or abnormal. Within modern racist regimes of power, that is, non-white skin and non-Christian religious affiliation are marked as abnormal, but so too are low IQ-test score, periodic epileptic seizures, unusual formation of the genitals, cross-gendered comportment, and same-sex coupling. Modern racism, McWhorter states, is neither identical with nor exhausted by attitudes and actions that harm people of color or Jewish people, as is generally supposed; although it encompasses these phenomena, it also exceeds them (34).

Because McWhorter accepts Foucault’s thesis that modern racism is racism against the abnormal, racism, in her analysis, is more comprehensive than other contemporary academic or popular conceptions assume it to be, insofar as the networks of power productive of the racist heritage that she traces extend beyond the domination of racialized minorities in industrialized nations and operate toward the purification of the white, Nordic race, with the implication that racism becomes an oppression not only of non-white racialized people, but also of white people deemed to be abnormal in some way. Not surprisingly, it is precisely this expansive conception of racism as a certain form of white supremacy that has become a source of some controversy about the book, as McWhorter anticipated it would. Critics of McWhorter’s extension (following Foucault) of

the concept of race have variously argued that such a theoretical move makes racism meaningless, is reductive, or homogenizes peoples of color. Contra these critics, I want to argue that McWhorter's expanded conception of racism is a path-breaking and far-reaching contribution to critical race theory, disability theory, queer theory, and Foucault scholarship that complicates some of the most accepted understandings of these fields and shows how these understandings have at different times, in unexpected ways, enhanced relations of subjection, domination, and control.

The title of McWhorter's book might be taken to suggest that the regulatory and disciplining networks of power that propel racism and sexual oppression should alone be foregrounded in any reading of the book. That is to say, the title of the book might seem to instruct that the genealogy McWhorter traces is concentrated primarily on, if not limited to, these two unsavory phenomena. Although in the introduction to the book McWhorter makes clear that both racism and heterosexism play out as crusades against deviance, against the threat posed by abnormality or pathology, and despite the fact that disability appears throughout the book—and especially in its fifth chapter through a lengthy discussion of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century classifications of mental defect—McWhorter herself gives no explicit indication that the book also comprises a genealogy, or part of a genealogy, of disability. These, then, are possible explanations why, to date, commentators on *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America* have ignored the centrality of disability to the story of racism that McWhorter tells, that is, why disability has been regarded as tangential to the ostensibly principal subject matter of the book, and why the implications of McWhorter's (and Foucault's) claims about race and normalization for work in philosophy of disability have thus far gone unexplored and almost entirely unacknowledged by other commentators on her book.

Notwithstanding these explanations, I contend that there are, in addition, serious theoretical and substantive reasons for the heretofore failure of commentators to recognize disability as fundamental to the story of racism that Foucault introduced, and that McWhorter documents in detail. An appreciation of the centrality of disability to modern racism against the abnormal requires understanding and taking adequate account of the formative role that biopower played in modern racism's emergence and proliferation by and through medical, professional, and juridical discourses. In addition, it requires understanding and taking account of the relations between biopower and a cluster of mechanisms that Foucault argued have come to characterize modern Western societies, namely, liberalism as an art of governing, capitalism, normalization, and medicalization. Were the historical significance of biopower and its relations to these mechanisms properly understood and accounted for, disability would be construed as inseparable from, and integral to, the conceptual apparatuses of a genealogy of modern racism; furthermore,

genealogies of intellectual disability in particular could reach further into the past and the scope of their social and political implications would broaden.

McWhorter acknowledges that racism against the abnormal would be unthinkable in the absence of the biological sciences, clinical medicine, and institutional psychiatry that arose in the last half of the nineteenth century. “Scientific racism,” she writes, “was not just an attempt on the part of some scientists, intellectually compromised by irrational prejudice, 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). This is a racism that has sought to intensify, augment, and improve human intelligence, productivity, and mastery of nature, a racism that has attempted to control and enhance every aspect of human reproduction and sexuality in order to direct the course and evolution of human life itself, a racism characteristic of biopower, the convergence of disciplinary normalization and population management in vast networks of production and social control (139–40, 12–13). Indeed, this is a racism on whose genealogy can be directly mapped many of the biopolitical, cultural, medical, and institutional practices that disability studies scholars have identified as constitutive elements in the history of ableism, which is the form of prejudice, hatred, and disdain that, to this day, conditions practices aimed at correcting and ideally eliminating people who are blind, deaf, stutter, are too short, have only one arm, do not walk, are nonverbal, or are anti-social. In sum, a thorough genealogical examination of biopower’s techniques would show that disability is historically, conceptually, politically, and socially inseparable from other legacies of oppression in ways never thought before.

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