

2010

Book Panel Response: Symposium on Ladelle McWhorter's Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy

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Recommended Citation

McWhorter, Ladelle. "Book Panel Response: Symposium on Ladelle McWhorter's Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy." *Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2010): 1-4.

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Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 6, number 1. Spring 2010

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

Book Panel Response

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I want to thank Cynthia Willett, Ron Sundstrom, Robert Gooding-Williams, and Sally Haslanger, who arranged this virtual panel, and Shannon Sullivan, Bill Wilkerson, Kathryn Gines, and Alia Al-Saji, who have offered their critiques of my book. For any author, an opportunity such as this is a great privilege and an honor. I appreciate it deeply.

Unfortunately I do not have space to address individually each issue these four papers raise. Instead, I will first situate my work in relation to identity politics and address fears that my approach is reductive. Then, building on comments from Professors Wilkerson and Al-Saji, I will offer some remarks about aims, methods, and shortcomings.

Earlier this year the governing board of Equality Virginia (an LGBT rights organization affiliated with the Human Rights Campaign) voted to prohibit Executive Director Jon Blair from working in coalition with any group that did not make “LGBT issues” its focus. By withdrawing Blair’s mandate, the EV board repudiated its affiliation with the C3 Table, a coalition of 501c3 organizations in Virginia who share resources and support each others’ work on issues ranging from housing and health care to environmental justice to racial profiling. Now, while other organizations build a network of shared knowledge and political connections, Equality Virginia will “go it alone.”

Whatever it may be in theory, this is identity politics “on the ground,” and it is a failing strategy. As board secretary for the group that pioneered the C3 Table (Virginia Organizing, www.virginia-organizing.org), I believe the only way to resist oppression effectively is to build alternative power/knowledge networks to counter and disrupt dominant networks. We cannot do that by confining ourselves to the categories to which we are assigned within those dominant networks.

Ironically, Equality Virginia’s insistence on the purity of LGBT activism results from the diversity that exists among people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered. Activists fear that if they fail to keep a tight focus, they will alienate one or another sector of that base—especially the upper-middle-class major-donor sector, which is largely white and largely male. It may well be that a majority of this group rejects the idea that the discrimination they suffer is in any way connected with current manifestations of anti-black or anti-brown racism, let alone with the marginalization of the poor and disabled or the destruction of the environment. But whether major donors would reject that idea or not, activists who depend on their contributions never risk putting it forward. Anyone attentive

to mainstream gay rights rhetoric knows this: Whenever gay rights activists draw analogies between their situation or movement and those of racial minorities, they always cite the past—i.e., Jim Crow and the SCLC. They want to harness the power of a now-hallowed history of struggle, not take their place alongside other groups suffering oppression in the present. Professor Gines to the contrary, they *never* claim to be victims of racism; they claim to be victims of something that is *not* racism but that is *analogous* to the racism of a bygone era.

My book takes a different approach. While it does not preclude some versions of identity politics, as Professor Al-Saji aptly notes, it refuses to take identities as fundamental to its analysis. Accordingly, it is not about race or gender or sexual orientation. It is about racism and sexual oppression—that is, it is about power.

An ancestor to the power networks we today recognize as racism arose when colonists in Virginia and Maryland took the concept of racial lineage and reworked it to produce a concept of racial morphology as a tool to discipline a population of culturally various European immigrants, African slaves and freedmen, and indigenous Americans. The usual ways of categorizing people—by lineage, language, religion, social class—did not work for British planters and governors in the “new world,” where so many different people from different ancestries and geographical areas mingled and had to be fitted into a relatively new kind of economic machine. Dividing people into a few large groups based on physical appearance worked better. Decades later, this set of classifying practices was dignified by scientific and philosophical theories that “accounted” for physical differences and linked them with other sorts of differences—in intellect, moral sensitivity, etc.—that purportedly justified differential legal treatment and economic use.

Like lineal racism, morphological racism is an *ancestor* of modern racism. Through the nineteenth century morphological race was absorbed into discourses and practices of normalization and biopower and, in the process, fused with the *dispositif de sexualité*. The latter half of my book traces that fusion, which gave us the scientific racism of the late nineteenth century, the eugenics of the first half of the twentieth century, and the postwar pro-family movement. That racism is thoroughly sexualized. It seethes with anxiety about white lineal purity and so demands strict surveillance over the sexual conduct of people of color and white women.

Many people have noted this fact. But, coming at it from a psychological perspective, most treat the sexualization of racial difference as an imposition; there is racial difference and then, through various psycho-social mechanisms, those perceived differences are suffused with sexual meaning. My book makes a *very* different claim: Sexuality—the apparatus of power that Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality*—came into existence in the process by which race was transformed from morphology to an expression of developmental biology; as racial difference came to be understood as an effect of evolutionary development (or the failure, retardation, or reversal thereof), sexual reproduction came to be seen as a site of extreme danger and tremendous potential. Simultaneously a disparate set of discourses and practices coalesced to form the *dispositif de sexualité*—an assemblage of overlapping, interlocking, mutually reinforcing but not necessarily consistent networks of force relations.

Thus, the birthplace of sexuality lies in the networks of biopower that historians term “scientific racism.” One of the book’s most controversial claims is that sexuality is always thoroughly racial. Sexuality was “invented” to discipline and normalize racialized populations in the racist project of Anglo-Saxon world domination. Sexuality, as Professor Al-Saji puts it, “is a tool of white supremacy.”

History shows this clearly. By the nineteenth century's end, morphological races were understood as, essentially, deviants from the normal course of evolutionary progress—i.e., as abnormal. Simultaneously—and primarily because of these discursive and institutional formations—any other sort of developmental deviation (abnormality) that hardened into a category got construed and treated as a race. All kinds of developmental deviations—whether morphological races, morons, sex perverts, or criminals—were deviations from the path of evolutionary advance, which northern Europeans had supposedly been moving steadily along ever since they “invented” civilization; deviants were throwbacks, atavisms, or degenerates, a danger to what eventually became *the* evolutionarily progressive human gene pool. Thus it is, as Professor Al-Saji notes, that race is the measure of all abnormality, at least in the mark this history leaves on all developmental difference. And, thus, there is no way for responsible analysis to rush through the “race stuff,” as Professor Gines puts it, in order to get to the “sexual oppression stuff”; there are not two “stuffs.” Professor Al-Saji puts it well: “one oppression is already many.” Sexual oppression *is* one of the ways that racism is carried out, extended, and maintained; racism *is* sexually oppressive.

Professor Gines fears that this conceals the specificity of black lesbian experience. Professor Sullivan worries that something is lost if we understand Matthew Shepard as, at some level, a casualty of racism. Professor Wilkerson wants us to remember that there is such a thing as black homophobia. I share my interlocutors' desire to maintain analytic specificity. In genealogical practice any loss of specificity is problematic; difference and discontinuity are the resources to be inventoried and deployed to disrupt power networks that normalize, homogenize, manage, and repress. Genealogy cannot be reductive. It *must* maintain awareness of difference. The Nazis' murder of six million Jews is not the same as the Bureau of Indian Affairs' program to eradicate Native

American cultures. The enslavement of African Americans is not the same as the life-long incarceration and forced labor of impoverished Appalachians in efforts to protect normal citizens from the menace of the feebleminded. And none of these events is the same as the systematic mutilation of the genitals and brains of homosexual men and women in psychiatric hospitals through most of the twentieth century. This book's point is not that these events are the same or that their differences are unimportant. But, as importantly different as they are, they are connected, and if we fail to heed those connections, we will fail to understand and effectively oppose the networks of power that oppress us.

My book analyzes racism as a vast, historically emerging, shifting network of power/knowledge relations that produces multiple differential effects—e.g., multiple subject positions; multiple forms of oppression, experience and injustice; multiple and conflicting discursive regimes. I am acutely aware that this genealogical approach differs radically from virtually all twentieth-century work on racism and that with novelty there are always risks. Nevertheless, I believe my analysis maintains the crucial distinction between racism—the shifting power-knowledge network it examines—and the multiple differential effects that racism produces. Nothing in the book prevents thorough exploration of black lesbian experience or the many factors that led to Matthew Shepard's murder or the differences between life and death in the Castro and life and death in the Barrio. Nor does the book lend credence to Limbaugh-esque cries of anti-white racism, as Professor Gines suggests. In fact, by revealing white supremacy's close ties to neoconservatism, it undercuts such outrageous assertions.

As Professor Wilkerson underlines, I do not offer a systematic theory of oppression. *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America* does not ask readers to give up everything and follow either its epistemological or its political lead. The

purpose of genealogical practice, as I understand it, is to discover new points of departure. Its success is measured not by how much truth it produces but by whether it opens new possibilities for thought, feeling, and action. In other words, genealogy is meant to move us.

Sometimes Foucault refers to genealogy as “counter-memory.” It is not merely deconstructive. It assembles a new narrative about how things came to be as they are, one that opposes the way things are not by arguing against them on logical or moral grounds but by undermining the plausibility of the narratives that justify them, render them seemingly inevitable, and silence the rage and pain they produce. It is meant to connect with that rage and pain and with other fragments of memories – with what Foucault calls subjugated knowledges – to make possible a network of counter forces, a different way of seeing that siphons away the credibility and affective energy of the narratives that hold oppressive structures in place. A genealogy is not a definitive statement. It is a beginning. What it hopes to initiate is a realignment of forces beyond its own text. That is one reason I welcome this discussion and appreciate these four colleagues’ remarks. A genealogy is a move seeking to incite more moves. If it provokes no questions and spurs no steps beyond itself, it is wasted effort.

Unlike Michel Foucault, I am not a master genealogist. This project was at times unwieldy, much bigger than I was, and frequently out of my emotional and scholarly control. The book raises many more questions than it settles and points in many more directions than I could possibly go. At times, perceiving a massive weight on the side of alternative views, I no doubt overstated my case, as Professors Sullivan and Al-Saji have intimated. At times I argued vociferously against my own viscera and long-held beliefs. The text betrays the raw edges of the transformations I underwent while writing it. It is an amazingly imperfect book. But writing it did move

me; it opened avenues for thinking that I had not previously imagined. I hope it can do something similar for its readers, even if it serves them only as Wittgenstein’s ladder, to be discarded once it is used.

Thank you all again for your time, attention, and insights.