

Moreover, one of the virtues of this collection is the sustained attention given to the ethical importance of thinking different spheres of the non-human as constitutive of our humanity. Engaging and timely, this collection is a valuable contribution to an increasingly important field of scholarship.

**Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009; 420 pages. ISBN: 978-0253220639.**

*Review by Anna Carastathis, California State University, Los Angeles*

For those familiar with McWhorter's work, the publication of *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America* was long awaited.<sup>1</sup> I had encountered an early form of the argument McWhorter rehearses in this book in an article she published in 2004 in *Hypatia*.<sup>2</sup> At that time, it was one of very few published critical engagements with the intersectional model of oppression. It had come to seem to me that, as the model became "mainstreamed"—that is, appropriated from Black feminists, who had introduced and elaborated the concept—the representational purposes to which intersectionality was now harnessed had changed. McWhorter pondered whether the increasingly vague gesture to intersectionality in feminist circles had become little more than "just a strategy to avoid charges of racism or classism." (McWhorter, 2004, 38–39) What I found impressive about that article was its iconoclasm. McWhorter's project was to go beyond *postulating* that racial and sexual oppressions intersect—a claim rarely *theorised* in mainstream (that is, white-dominated) feminist theory. She argued that a genealogical investigation of the production of race and sex could illuminate their common investment with a form of power that, following Foucault, she termed "biopower."

At the end of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes the historical shift in the nature and exercise of power. If more ancient forms of power (sovereign power) were characterised by "the right to take life or *let live*," modern power (biopower) has as its "highest function" not killing, but fostering and regulating life.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, "it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave

power its access even to the body.” (Foucault, 143) A biopolitical society is a normalising, disciplinary society. As McWhorter explains, it produces both “normal” and “abnormal” or, “residual,” subjects. (50) The latter are the “external frontier” of disciplinary regimes: “individuals who are defined by the fact that the discipline cannot assimilate them.” (51) Yet normalising societies cannot “tolerate any residue,” anything “unassimilable.” Consequently, they produce new, supplementary disciplines to manage the unruly subjects whom the existing disciplines abject or discard. (50–51) A normalising society, then, “insists on normality, all the while generating new forms of abnormality.” (51)

In lectures he gave at the *Collège de France* in the late 1970s, Foucault mentions that the “introduction and activation” of racism are central to the emergence of biopower. It is in part this insight that leads McWhorter to pursue the genealogical project of the book: normalising disciplines, discourses and institutions in which biopower is exercised created “a new racism,” which Foucault calls “racism against the abnormal.” (32) Through a genealogy of modern racism in “Anglo-America” (her focus is mainly on the United States), McWhorter attempts to demonstrate two things: first, that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century racism is conceptualised and exercised biopolitically—that is, producing, distinguishing and regulating both the “normal” and the “abnormal” through various disciplines, institutions and discourses. Second, biopower in general takes the form of racism, even when the populations it targets are not understood as “racial” groups (for instance, “sexual minorities”). (37) McWhorter explores the question, “what could racism mean in the absence of race” as its ontological anchor? (42)

Having laid out a brief etymology of racism, which identifies slippery and often contradictory meanings imputed to the word “race” (Chapter One), McWhorter sketches the history of biopolitical racism—a 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon—offering a two-part “genealogy of modern racism” (Chapters Two and Three). She concludes that “by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century...race was no longer merely a morphological category, a designation of physical appearance only loosely associated with heredity. Integrated into the science of biology...racial difference was, essentially, developmental difference,” which was seen to be sexually reproduced. (139) At this point, we might say that racial and sexual oppressions came to intersect. In Chapters Four and Five, McWhorter explores the fusing of scientific racism and sexual politics. If, after the Holocaust, scientific

racists in the US had to go “underground,” the biopolitical disciplines they had invented to control and regulate normalised and abnormal populations remained in place and even proliferated. (245) In Chapter Six, McWhorter shows how eugenicists tried to morally recuperate their project, largely by shifting their attention from “races” to “families”: “In the postwar years, *family* would become the semantic substitute for *race*.” (250) Pronatalist policies were directed toward white heterosexual families, consisting of two legally married white adults, one male and one female, who were seen fit to make a “eugenic contribution.” (254) At the same time, involuntary sterilisation was practiced on those people whom eugenicists (who, it should be emphasised, wielded state power) constructed as “unfit” to reproduce, that is, Black people, indigenous people, people with disabilities. Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, involuntary sterilisation became a common practice in the US and its colonies. In Puerto Rico, 1 in 3 women were involuntarily sterilised in what became known simply as “*la operación*.” In the continental US, 40% of Native women and 10% of Native men were sterilised during the 1970s. By 1976, 25% of Native women had been sterilised without their consent—as many as 80% of women on some reservations.<sup>4</sup> As the pronatalist/genocidal sides of eugenicist biopolitics show, “family” and “race” functioned as euphemistic and dysphemistic counterparts. As such, threats to the family internal to the white “race”—white feminists and white homosexuals—were seen as race traitors. (264–66) Normalising power attempts to re-absorb them in order to exploit their reproductive potential, preventing, for instance, queer lives from being lived. (273) McWhorter wants to emphasise that by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, racism and sexual oppression are *nearly* inextricable manifestations of biopolitics. Taking the family as the site of state discipline, she argues that reproductive oppression of sexual minorities functions as “racism against the abnormal.” (291) In the final chapter, McWhorter returns to the normative argument of the book: the discussion she begins in the Introduction of the political relationship between the Civil Rights and Gay and Lesbian Movements. There, the broad question is, how should the inheritors of these movements—contemporary antiracist and anti-homophobia activists—act politically given the similarities *and* differences between racist and homophobic violence? What is the status of analogies between racial oppression and sexual oppression? By the Conclusion, it becomes clear that McWhorter intends the genealogy she performs in book as an inter-

vention to help heal the fractures she diagnoses between “African Americans” and “LGBT Americans.” These fractures, she argues, have been fostered in part by the Christian Right, in part by the white-dominated same-sex marriage movement. (299, 315) McWhorter sees the “conflicts” that have arisen between these groups as issuing from “a rush for the moral high ground,” in which each tries to “win the normality game” on the other’s back. (323) Of course, this strategy is bound to fail both parties, since the internalisation of the desire for normalcy on the part of those deemed “abnormal” is the ultimate achievement, and not the undoing, of regimes of disciplinary normalisation. If modern racism *is* racism against the abnormal, it implicates and targets even white queers, to the extent that heteronormativity functions like racism in constructing them as “abnormal.” The normative upshot is that each group deemed abnormal has a stake in the others’ struggles, which are directed toward the same biopolitical structures. Thus, McWhorter suggests that the “question we really should be asking” is “Who benefits when queer people and people of colour fail to stand up for each other’s dignity, worth, and civil rights, and when we all fail to stand up for the dignity, worth and rights of people who live with physical and mental disabilities or with the handicaps imposed by poverty?” (324) Contrasting “identity-based politics” with “genealogy-based politics,” McWhorter calls on us to “recognize and credit the subjugated knowledges that reveal our histories as subjugated peoples bound together across our differences through the past four hundred years.” (328)

If the above exposition does any justice to summarising what is a voluminous and scrupulously detailed work, let me now voice a couple of concerns about its arguments. My first criticism is that while the book positions itself as “going beyond” intersectionality, it is unclear to me how it does so. In the Introduction, McWhorter distances herself from the “metaphor of intersection,” which, she claims, “does not begin to capture the complexity of the power relations” that she aims to reveal in the book. (15) Power is too complex for intersectionality to capture, she suggests, because “[i]ntersectional analyses tend to focus analytic attention primarily on identities rather than on institutions, discourses, and disciplinary regimes.”<sup>5</sup> (15) What is more, despite their insistence on the convergence of multiple oppressions, McWhorter claims that intersectional analyses “still implicitly assume that racism, sexism, and heterosexism *could* and *do* operate sometimes in isolation from one an-

other.” (15, emphasis added) Yet the same can be observed of her own genealogy. McWhorter offers ample concrete illustration of how race, sexuality and biopower *become* inextricable. Her own treatment of the historical record suggests that race and sexuality *were* at one point seen as distinct, and only converge in the biopolitical—that is, the modern—era. Thus, she too seems to assume that the categories of race and sexuality are conceptually and historically isolable—her charge against intersectional analyses. And while she focusses on discourses (as opposed to identities), it is not clear to me that this level of analysis is incompatible with intersectionality. No further arguments are presented against intersectionality, and it remains unclear to me how McWhorter’s genealogy of modern racism is not intersectional. While this Foucaultian genealogy is offered as an alternative (even as a corrective) to intersectionality (conflated with “identity politics”), substantive engagement with intersectionality—in a sense, the conceptual condition of possibility of her account—is virtually non-existent.<sup>6</sup>

My second cluster of criticisms of the book concerns its thesis that modern racism takes biopolitical form. As we have seen, McWhorter’s view is that modern subjects are shaped in profound ways by normalising power. Yet missing in this account of power—to rehearse a critique that Spivak makes of Foucault<sup>7</sup>—is a theory of interests. The claim that everyone in US society is subjected to normalising power risks eliding the variable operations of very different forms of power with starkly different aims vis-à-vis diametrically opposed social groups, economic classes, genders, internal colonies and the settler society. McWhorter’s conception of biopower seems to account much more than Foucault’s for systemic violence. Yet subsuming violence under biopower is not unproblematic. In some cases, McWhorter discusses “biopolitical terrorism”—US white supremacist terrorism against Black people and Indigenous people. Yet this violence is repurposed as “disciplinary power” (for instance, in her discussion of lynching on page 159).<sup>8</sup> While Foucault gives a nod to wars, massacres, atomic power, the death penalty and genocide, these forms of violence are vaguely conceptualised as the “underside” of a normalising power aimed at “optimizing life.” (Foucault, 136–138, 141) “If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers,” Foucault muses, “this is not because of the return of the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large scale phenomena of population.”

(Foucault, 137) Foucault's aim is to convince us that biopolitics has supplanted sovereign and juridical power. Yet this claim is not borne out if we focus, as McWhorter wants to, on racist and gendered violence, in which power *does seem* to figure as the "right to take life or let live," and the threat of death (in which I would include social death) is *central* to its operations. McWhorter's primary aim is to defend the thesis that race and sexuality are produced through normalising power. The Foucaultian disdain for juridical and sovereign power—which "is concerned with law and obedience, not norm and conformity" (49)—is expressed in McWhorter's analysis, sometimes to its detriment. The problem is that to be a "good Foucaultian," it seems one must insist on the primacy of one form of power, even in the presence of evidence of plural—and even contradictory—forms of power in operation. It seems to me that McWhorter devotes too little space to conceptualising the overtly violent and often deadly practices of appropriation and exploitation that constitute the ongoing process of accumulation in racial capitalist patriarchy.

McWhorter's book is perhaps most important for Foucaultians who wish to expand their understanding of their categories of analysis—specifically, biopower—beyond the scope these are given by Foucault himself. It is an ambitious project, to which philosophers of race, feminist philosophers and philosophers engaged in queer and transgender studies will want to devote attention. Having read and reread McWhorter's book with interest, I am left with the following questions. Has sovereign power really ceded to biopower in the production of gendered racism in the US? Are not the internal colonies of the US, indigenous nations and the nations that the US occupies abroad subject to sovereign power in the violent denial of their self-determination? Where exactly do the deadly violence of settler colonialism and the prison-industrial and military-industrial complexes fit in the account of normalisation? Might an integrative examination of racial and sexual oppressions require us to *revise* the concepts Foucault develops and to *depart* from his axiomatic assumptions? Why does no philosopher seem to worry that fidelity to their figure will lead them astray?

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1. Upon hearing of the publication of Ladelle McWhorter's genealogical investigation of the relationship between racial and sexual oppressions, I organised a reading group of faculty and graduate students. It was through our discussions that many of the ideas in

this review were first articulated. I am grateful to Ann Garry, Linda Greenberg, Anthony Ristow, Kai Kaululaau, Casey Keith, Molly Talcott and Ben Bateman for their insights.

2. Ladelle McWhorter, "Sex, Race, and Biopower: A Foucauldian Genealogy," in *Hypatia*, vol. 19, n. 3 (2004), 38–62.

3. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, (tr.) Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 135–47.

4. Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005).

5. McWhorter offers no references to substantiate this claim. In fact, many people who avow intersectionality as a method take themselves to be performing analyses of macro-level phenomena such as institutions and/or of meso-level phenomena such as social groups. Patricia Hill Collins, "Some Group Matters: Intersectionality, Situated Standpoints, and Black Feminist Thought," in *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, (ed.) Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 205–29. Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," in *Signs* vo. 30, no. 3 (2005), 1771–800.

6. A trivial point: "intersectionality" does not even appear in the book's index.

7. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretations of Culture*, (ed.) Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

8. McWhorter invites us to view the US institution of lynching and its justifying ideology of "the black rapist" "not so much in the context of more-or-less institutionalized ritual murder, but in the context of other discourses of sexual predation that arose and gained force in the late nineteenth century." (161)

**Simon Morgan Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary*. London: Continuum, 2010; 264 pages. ISBN: 978-1847065261.**

*Review by Steven Sych, McGill University*

There is, as Simon Wortham points out in his introduction to *The Derrida Dictionary*, a danger inherent in his project. The dictionary form is, after all, an attempt to present language in a systematic manner by means of a master text; yet the work of Jacques Derrida is, at least in part, characterised by the rigorous thinking of the limits and conditions of systematicity *as such*. This, then, is a manifestly dangerous marriage: if a dictionary aims to present the indexed meanings of the *termes d'art* of deconstructive discourse (ideal, non-contextual, and systematically related), does it not run up against the very resistance of this discourse to