

NORMAN LEVAN FACULTY COLLOQUIUM

Bakersfield College



**Professor
Reggie Williams**

Biography
Reggie Williams is Professor and Chair of Philosophy at Bakersfield College. He is a proud alumnus of BC, CSUB and the University of Illinois, where he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy. Reggie writes on a range of social/political issues, including poverty, abortion, same-sex marriage, and race. He has presented papers at Oxford University and the University of Colorado, Boulder. And his work has appeared in several professional philosophy journals, including *Utilitas*, *Public Affairs Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Moral Philosophy*.

RACISM, SEXISM, AND MISOGYNY



**Presented by:
Norman Levan Center For The Humanities**



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The Norman Levan Center for the Humanities at Bakersfield College is pleased to publish a paper by BC Professor Reggie Williams. His Faculty Colloquium lecture for fall 2010 was based on this very interesting and thoughtful paper.

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Sincerely,

Jack Hernandez
Director of the Norman Levan Center for the Humanities
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Racism, Sexism, and Misogyny

By Reginald Williams

1. Introduction

Discussions of language feature prominently in the literature on racism. There is good reason for this: Words, phrases, utterances, and the like can be racist, as beliefs, attitudes, and actions can be. In addition, theories of racism tend to appeal to the way people use various words and phrases—e.g., ones that are intuitively racist. Joshua Glasgow, for instance, has recently argued that ‘ ϕ is racist if and only if ϕ is disrespectful toward members of racialized group R as Rs’.¹ And Glasgow’s argument turns on language. In his words, ‘As an attempt to capture the content of our current, ordinary concept of racism, the adequacy criterion operative here is that an analysis should accommodate ordinary usage of relevant terms, terms like ‘racism’.² A common objection to theories of racism, however, is that they trivialize or ‘inflate’ the seriousness of certain racial offenses by implying that too many racial offenses are racist.³

This paper follows Glasgow in taking seriously the ordinary usage of ‘racism’ and ‘racist’. I, however, think that to get clear on racism, and to avoid trivializing or inflating the seriousness of certain racial offenses, we must not only look at the current usage of ‘racism’ and ‘racist’; we must examine the etymology of these terms vis-à-vis the etymology of ‘sexism’, ‘sexist’, ‘misogyny’, and ‘misogynist’. The upshot of this paper will be that a satisfactory understanding of racism requires that we coin and promulgate a racial analogue of ‘misogynist’: a term that refers to particularly egregious racial language, beliefs, attitudes, and actions, thereby freeing up ‘racist’ to refer to serious but not as egregious racial language, beliefs, attitudes, and actions.

¹See ‘Racism as Disrespect’, *Ethics* 120 (October, 2009), pp.81.

²*Ibid.*, 64.

³Glasgow acknowledges this objection. *Ibid.*, 91.

2. A Short History of the Terms

Benjamin Isaac has recently argued that the concept of racism dates back to antiquity⁴. Most historians, however, take racism to be a modern notion. George Fredrickson⁵ and David Theo Goldberg⁶, for example, argue that racism emerges in modernity. Interestingly, though, the term 'racist' was coined in 1926; 'racism' was coined even later in 1932.⁷ And the history and usage of these terms is what concern us here, given our emphasis on language.

According to the OED, 'racist' was coined in 1926 as a noun, meaning 'an advocate or supporter of racism; a person whose words or actions display racial prejudice or discrimination'. Just a year later, in 1927, 'racist' came to be used as an adjective, meaning 'of, relating to, or characterized by racism'. And again in 1932 'racism' was coined, meaning 'the belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races'.

This etymology is interesting, of course, given what went on in the United States prior to 1926: lynchings, slavery, discrimination, and a host of other assaults on the freedom, safety, and dignity of people who were distinguished by their alleged race and 'color'. The fifteenth amendment's passage in 1869 and ratification in 1870 adds to this interest, as this amendment states that 'the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude'.⁸ Clearly, and lamentably, racism was prominent in the United States long before 1926.

The etymology of 'sexism' and 'sexist' is also interesting. According to the OED, 'sexism' was coined in 1866. But it then meant 'the state or condition of belonging to the male or female sex'. It was not until 1934 that 'sexism' came to mean 'prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex'. 'Sexist', moreover, was not coined for another fifteen years. In 1949, 'sexist' was coined as a noun, meaning 'a person who advocates or practices sexism; esp., a man who discriminates against women on the basis of sex'.

⁴See *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁵See *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁶See *Racist Culture* (Malden: Blackwell, 1993).

⁷All of my definitions and comments on the etymology of 'racism', 'racist', 'sexism', 'sexist', 'misogyny', 'misogynist, and 'misogynistic' are taken from the OED online, available at www.oed.com.

⁸Floyd G. Cullop, *The Declaration of Independence and The Constitution of the United States* (New York: Signet Classics, 2009), pp. 142.

'Sexist' was first used as an adjective in 1968, meaning 'of, relating to, or characteristic of sexism or sexists; that advocates or practices sexism, esp. against women'.⁹

Sexism no more came to exist in 1934 than racism came to exist in 1926. Women, after all, were not permitted to vote in the United States until 1920. While sexism predates the coinage of 'sexism', and while 'racism' and 'racist' were coined before 'sexism' and 'sexist', 'misogyny' was coined centuries before any of these terms.

According to the OED, 'misogyny' was coined in 1656, meaning 'hatred or dislike of, or prejudice against women'. 'Misogynist' was coined decades earlier, in 1620, meaning 'a person who hates, dislikes, or is prejudiced against women'. And 'misogynistic' was coined in 1821, meaning 'relating to or characteristic of misogynists or misogyny; that hates or is prejudiced against women'.

'Prejudice against women' is part of the definition of 'misogyny', but the notion of hatred that misogyny conveys makes it a stronger notion than that of sexism. It is intuitively one thing to say something that is sexist, quite another to say something that is misogynistic. It can be all-too-easy, for instance, to accidentally say something that stereotypes women and is thus sexist; it is more difficult to accidentally say something that conveys hatred toward women and is thus 'misogynistic' in the full sense of the term. Furthermore, while there is plenty of debate over what constitutes sexism, and while the seriousness of sexist language, beliefs, attitudes, and actions admits of degrees, the fact that we distinguish 'misogyny' from 'sexism' allows us to distinguish the most deeply offensive language, beliefs, attitudes, and actions toward women from offenses that are serious but not among the most egregious offenses against women.

I hope never to be the one at a party who claims,

(a) 'Women tend to be less sexually aggressive than men',

let alone,

(b) 'Women are typically less intelligent than men'.

Such comments clearly stereotype women and are sexist, and I take both (a) and (b) to be offensive. Although such claims are sexist, my experience of them is that they tend to betray ignorance more than hatred.

Note: Before the corresponding substantive notion emerged. (Obviously, before the coinage of 'racism' dictionaries did not define 'racist' in terms of 'racism', as the OED does now that we have the notion of 'racism'.)

⁹Note that while 'racist' was coined and used as an adjective before 'racism' was coined, 'sexism' was coined and used in its current sense before 'sexist' was coined and used as a noun or an adjective. So in the case of race, but not in the case of sex, the notion of one whose actions or words display prejudice emerged linguistically.

And, yes, I regret to report that I have heard both (a) and (b) uttered at parties by otherwise educated people.

Now consider this claim:

(c) 'Given their typical lack of intelligence, women are best kept cooking, cleaning, or off their feet'.

I take it that (c) is even more offensive than (a) or (b). I take it that lacking intelligence, which (b) and (c) ascribes to women, is a more intrinsically negative trait than is lacking sexual aggression, which (a) ascribes to women. Moreover, to the considerable extent that lacking intelligence is negative, (c) is presumably more offensive than (b) because (c) presents the idea that women typically lack intelligence as a reason for thinking that women best function as cooks, cleaners, or sex partners. The problem with (c) is that it largely reduces the existence of women to that of cooks, cleaners, or sex partners. And while is nothing wrong with being a cook, cleaner or sex partner, these roles should exhaust the existence of no one.

One could take (c) to be not merely sexist but misogynistic; in at least some contexts, this is presumably the right assessment of (c). One could, however, argue that, while repugnant, believing or uttering (c) is consistent with one's not *hating* women but rather seeing them in terms of a function to which their existence ought not to be reduced. That is, one could take (c) to be a deeply offensive sexist claim but not misogynistic in the sense that these claims are:

(d) 'Women are whores',

(e) 'Women are evil', and

(f) 'Women should be slain'.

Regardless of one's intuitions of (c) as sexist or misogynistic, I take it that (d)-(f) are misogynistic in the fullest sense, as they convey a palpable hatred toward women. 'Whores', 'evil', and 'slain' are very strong words, as are such actions as wife battering, female circumcision, and rape. Ultimately, though, the key issue here is not whether the distinction between 'sexist' and 'misogynistic' lies between (a) and (b), (b) and (c), (c) and (d)-(f), or some other set of claims, beliefs, attitudes, or actions. The point is that we distinguish sexism from misogyny, and we take this distinction to be meaningful and significant. This point reveals a common problem with the literature on racism.

There is vast disagreement about what language, beliefs, attitudes, and actions are 'racist'. Some commentators, such as Tommie Shelby and Dinesh D'Souza, hold that racism is ultimately rooted in some kind of belief, ideology, theory, or judgment—e.g., the belief that a race is inferior or worthy of exclusion from full political participation.¹⁰

J. L. A. Garcia argues that one could hate the members of a racial group without holding any beliefs or judgments about them; one could hate the members of a racial group *just because of their membership* in that group.¹¹

Lawrence Blum offers a synthesis of these views, according to which racism relates to either inferiorization (construed as the content of a belief or doctrine) or antipathy (a non-cognitive attitude).¹² And Glasgow wants to extend racism to 'accommodate' beliefs and remarks that homogenize a racial group.¹³

In an interesting footnote, Glasgow brackets the question of whether all 'well-intended' homogenizing claims about members of racial groups are racist, or only ones that are false. Glasgow is wise to consider this question thoroughly before answering it; it's tricky. According to the US Census Bureau, for instance, 20.7% of all black families in America lived at or below the US poverty line as of 2008 (more than twice the poverty rate of any other racial group in the United States).¹⁴ While the rate varies somewhat from region to region, abject poverty among black Americans sadly spans the country. As 20.7% of all black families in the United States lived at or below the US poverty line in 2008, one could then say:

(g) 'For any randomly selected black family in the United States, it has a 20.7% likelihood of living at or below the US poverty line'.

Believing (g), moreover, could assist college admissions officers in trying to combat black poverty via affirmative action; hopefully such a judgment is not racist.

Even if one disagrees with this example and sees (g) as racist, there is presumably a range of offensive racial claims, beliefs, attitudes, and actions.

¹⁰ See Shelby, 'Is Racism in the Heart?' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (2002), pp. 41-20 and Goldberg, see 'Racism and Rationality: The Need for a New Critique,' *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 20 (1990), pp. 317-50.

¹¹ See 'Current Conceptions of Racism: A Critical Examination of Some Recent Social Philosophy,' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 28 (1997), pp. 5-42.

¹² See 'Racism: What It Is and What It Isn't,' *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21 (2002), pp. 203-218.

¹³ 'Racism', p. 70.

¹⁴ See www.blackdemographics.com/housing_poverty.html.

And the literature on racism would benefit from a means of distinguishing them. Consider the following claims:

- (h) 'All black people are poor'.
- (i) 'All black people are niggers'.
- (j) 'Some black people are niggers'.
- (k) 'All black people should be lynched'.
- (l) 'Some black people should be lynched'.

I take (h) seriously, but I tend to think that (h) betrays ignorance more than racism, given that one who utters (h) does not display or harbor hostility toward black people. Some will disagree with me, perhaps many.

Regardless of whether one takes (h) to be racist, however, I take there to be an important difference between (h), which is false and stereotypes black people, and (i)-(l). For (i) and (j) characterize black people in terms of the most loaded negative term for them in the English language—'nigger'—and (k) and (l) advocate not just lethal violence toward black people but a lethal act that has strong racial associations. As 'flogging' has a racial association in the United States that 'beating' and even 'whipping' lack, 'lynching' has a racial association in the United States that 'hanging' lacks.

I submit that even if one takes (h) to be racist, we need a term that is stronger than 'racist' to identify and discourse about claims like (i)-(l), as we have 'misogynistic' to identify and discourse about claims that are not merely sexist. Given that 'misogynistic' was coined in the seventeenth century, given that the concept of racism dates back to modernity, if not to antiquity, and given that people have long hated others as members of alleged races, one has to wonder why we still lack a linguistic analogue of 'misogynistic' to refer to the hatred of people as members of an alleged race.

I propose that from here on 'mirogynistic' be used to identify and discourse about racial offenses that are beyond 'racist' and betray a hatred of people as members of an alleged race. I, of course, take (i)-(l) to be mirogynistic; some may take (h) to be as well. The key issue, for my purposes, is not which specific claims are and are not mirogynistic; this can be sorted out later. The point is that we need to distinguish racist language, beliefs, attitudes, and actions from particularly egregious racial offenses, which I am calling mirogynistic. This distinction would be a boon to the literature on racism.

3. Concluding Remarks

The literature on racism is as divergent as any body of literature I have encountered in social philosophy, and I read and write on a wide range of issues in the area. This literature is particularly vexed, again, because commentators tend to dispute, not just each others' theories on what racism is, but each others' examples of putatively racist language, beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Reading the primary contributors to the debate—Glasgow, Shelby, Garcia, Blum, and others—one is almost left wondering if they agree on anything. But without some common ground, without at least some pre-theoretical agreement on the examples of racism worth analyzing, it is no wonder the literature on racism is so vexed.

I submit that the literature on racism has been constrained by language. The racism debate has been constrained by the fact that we have had one term—'racist'—to refer to a wide range of language, beliefs, attitudes, and actions. What we need, again, is a distinction analogous to that between 'sexist' and 'misogynistic'.

My distinction between 'racist' and 'mirogynistic' allows us to discuss, with increased clarity and precision, the relative seriousness of racial offenses, distinguishing racial offenses that are racist from those which are mirogynistic. In addition, my distinction prevents us from trivializing or inflating the notion of racism. My distinction does not entail that racism is trivial. On the contrary, it allows us to distinguish racism as a serious moral offense from racial offenses that are particularly egregious—e.g., ones that are motivated by hate. And with this distinction, we can avoid implying either that only particularly egregious racial offenses are racist or that all racial offenses are egregious.

One could object that my argument absurdly implies that particularly egregious racial offenses are not racist. If anything is racist, one could argue, particularly egregious racial offenses surely are. This objection, however, does not worry me. There exists a longstanding precedent for seeing particularly egregious offenses against women as misogynistic, not merely sexist. And no one takes 'misogynistic' to trivialize such offenses, or to imply absurdly that particularly egregious offenses against women are not sexist. I see no reason to abstain from thinking of racial offenses in a parallel manner.

One could also object that 'mirogyny' and 'mirogynistic' are not the best terms for my purposes in this paper. I of course replaced the 's' in 'misogyny' and 'misogynistic' with an 'r' for 'race', taking my cue from the fact that 'sex' replaced 'rac' in 'racism' and 'racist' when 'sexism' and 'sexist' were coined. I, however, am not an etymologist; so there may be a better word to denote particularly egregious racial offenses. If there is, I would ask those with superior language skills to coin it (I'll take a footnote). If there is not, I would advocate the adoption of 'mirogynistic' for the reasons sketched in this paper.