What Race Is Your Disease? Africanizing “Dirt”

Just as the figure of “the prostitute” is habitually regarded as a source rather than a victim of disease, so we may trace on the pattern of displacements which offer us a carnal Africa as the “source” of AIDS, transported home to the bosom of the white Western family via the “monstrous passions” of “perverts” and “the promiscuous.”

Complications: The Co-Constitution of Race, Class, and Gender

In her work on race, gender, and sexuality in the European colonial project, postcolonial theorist Anne McClintock lays out the co-constitutive nature of systems of oppression: “[R]ace, gender, and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego. Rather, they come into existence in and through relation to each other—if in contradictory and conflictual ways.” This then begs the following questions when doing any contextual analysis: How are class and gender implicated in the construction of the understandings of race, particularly but not exclusively, in this case, “blackness” and “whiteness”? How are gender and race implicated in the construction of the understandings of labor and class? How are class and race implicated in the construction of the understandings of gender, particularly masculinity and femininity? It also begs the analysis of power in all social classifications of differentiation, especially in terms of and through the lenses of imperial and
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colonial interests. The co-constitution of interlocking and multiplying systems of domination and marginalization has many implications.

In her commentary on this co-constitution, Laurel C. Schneider states that the result of this is “a set of ideologies of race, sex, and gender—ideologies that serve to keep individual people in places” subject to structures maintaining power and privilege. She continues by stating that the legitimacy of the hierarchies is inherited from a theory of “natural endowment in which the superior qualities of one group could, through a kind of trickle-down effect, improve the overall position of everyone while further cementing its own dominant position.” The logic of progress of the European colonial project necessitates the counterlogic of degeneracy used to explain and enforce the domination and marginalization of those bodies marked as other than the white heterosexual upper- or middle-class male and sometimes female control group. Yet, the “naturalness” of classifications of differentiation of bodies is no longer taken as “natural,” in the sense of a biological given. Rather, scholars in a number of theoretical disciplines are paying attention to the cultural constructedness of these categories that impact HIV & AIDS interpretations of “risk environments.”

People become “dirty” when they transgress the socially prescribed places that their race, sex, gender, and/or class indicates. But, it is much trickier than that. Although the structural binary categories of female/male, nonwhite/white, poor/rich, uncivilized/civilized and so on are not “natural” and far from stable, language helps us perceive the world. Thus, these categories have real implications for embodied experience. “[W]ithout femininity to define it masculinity collapses on itself and vaporizes... But even more dramatically... without masculinity whiteness collapses, and without femininity blackness collapses.” “Tribal” classifications are not isolated qualifiers but depend upon each other in complicated ways in the making of human experience.

What is at stake, then, is the greater question and issue of “otherness” that finds its particular expressions in the cross-hatching and co-constitution of race, class, and gender, among other classifications. It is intimately tied also to an economic system in which “good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need” or flourishing; thus, resulting in a system built upon systematized oppression of “surplus” and dehumanized populations in service to those “above.” In this system, Audre Lorde asserts, “we do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change”; rather, we are taught to respond with “fear and loathing” and either