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OPPRESSION, LIES, AND THE DREAM OF AUTONOMY

JUDY SCALES-TRENT*

As I understand it, Professor Abrams wants to explore the relationship between modern feminist theories of women's agency and "the liberal norm of autonomy"¹ What are these feminist theories? How might they transform theories about autonomy? I find this entire analysis problematic because the underlying feminist theory, as Abrams explains it, is not sound.

According to Abrams, women's lives are marked by constraints that make it difficult for them to exercise autonomy. She gives two reasons for this:

(1) The forces of the social construction of gender, which "may impose greater constraints or produce less desirable characteristics among women [and] may make it difficult to distinguish one's own norms from those [of others.]"²

(2) Women are "integrally connected to others, through relations of dependence and of dominance."³ The needs of those who are dependent on them, therefore, often "supplant" the choices and opportunities of the caregiver.⁴ A woman in such relationships, "may have little sense of making the rules to which she is subject."⁵ Also, for the caregiver in the family, "it is complicated to distinguish one's own norms from those arising from the

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1. The comments in this Essay are based on the paper that Professor Kathryn Abrams presented April 3, 1998, at the "Reconstructing Liberalism" Conference. All citations in this Article refer to that paper. See Kathryn Abrams, *From Autonomy to Agency: Feminist Perspectives on Self-Direction* (Mar. 1998) (unpublished manuscript, on file with author).

2. See *id.* at 9.

3. *Id.* at 10.

4. See *id.* at 11.

5. *Id.* at 12.

repeated performance of this activity, or from strong social norms that structure the consciousness of girls and women in this society."⁶

Abrams summarizes in this way:

Women's lives, according to feminist theory, are marked by constraints that make it difficult for them to exercise the kinds of autonomy described in liberal theory. The relationships of dependence and dominance that are paradigmatic for many women constrain their ability to achieve moral independence or even, in many cases, to experience the values that structure their daily lives as their own.⁷

Thus, according to Abrams, although perhaps there is such a creature as an autonomous individual in this society, because men oppress women, it is much more likely that the person who will achieve moral independence will be a man and not a woman.

Abrams also notes that those social norms "which both reflect and perpetuate power inequalities"⁸ between men and women affect "other marginalized groups"⁹ in the same way.¹⁰ I understand this argument to mean, therefore, that in America it is also easier for white people to be autonomous than it is for black people, because many white Americans oppress black Americans; and in Nazi Germany, it was more likely that Nazis would be autonomous than Jews, because Nazis oppressed Jewish people.

This seems very strange. How is it that the social construction of gender might limit women's ability to distinguish their own norms from the norms of others, and would not similarly limit men's ability to do the same? How is it possible that women could be connected to "others," and constrained through relations of dependence and domination, but those "others" would somehow not be similarly connected to women and thus similarly constrained?

Also, how wonderful for men! They not only get all the benefits that might come from exploiting women, but they also get to

6. *Id.* at 12-13.

7. *Id.* at 16.

8. *Id.* at 9.

9. *Id.*

10. *See id.*

possess the “valuable human attribute”¹¹ of autonomy at the same time!

The truth is, of course, not as Abrams suggests.¹² Men’s ability to distinguish their norms from the norms of others is seriously limited by the effort they expend in creating, maintaining, and imposing the social norms that create gender; and men too are powerfully connected to women in a “relationship of dependence and domination.”

Both Abrams’s argument and my critique sound much too abstract. I would like therefore to give some depth to my comments by describing my visit to the town of Williamsburg for this conference, and by situating this description within the context of racial oppression in America.

Let me start out by saying that I, like many other African-Americans, find it problematic to visit those southern communities that make a living by celebrating their antebellum past. How will the white people in these communities present that past? On the other hand, I do want to learn more about the lives of my relatives who were kidnapped and forced to work in slave labor camps so long ago.

In an effort to explore this past, I contacted a Williamsburg Web Site, writing that because I would be coming to the area to attend a conference at William and Mary, I needed information on “sites which explore the contributions of African-Americans to Virginian/American history,” with particular focus on Williamsburg. The answer was not long in coming: “We suggest that you contact William & Mary.edu for that information.” Startled by the notion that the Williamsburg web site would have no information at all on blacks in Colonial Williamsburg, I assumed that someone had misread my question. I wrote back, requesting clarification: “Does that web site have information about historic sites about African-Americans in Colonial Williamsburg and the surrounding area?” This time, there was no response at all.

11. *Id.* at 38.

12. Abrams appears to recognize this, as she notes that the search for autonomy would be complicated for “privileged” as well as “marginalized groups.” *See id.* at 29. She does not, however, allow this to influence her analysis.

"Aha," I thought, "this is not a good sign." Then I reminded myself that this is America, and I must be wary.

But I did not give up. Upon my arrival in Williamsburg, I began to search through the tourist materials placed in my hotel room. First, I read a flyer put out by the Williamsburg Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, noticing immediately that all of the people pictured in colonial garb had white skin.¹³ Had there really been no African-Americans at all in Williamsburg during this period? I then saw that, indeed, there must have been African-Americans in the area because, according to the Visitors Bureau, tourists could visit a "reconstructed slave quarter" on the outskirts of Colonial Williamsburg.¹⁴ What aggravated me in this flyer, however, was the extensive description of the plantations tourists could visit, to see how the "colonial aristocracy" lived.¹⁵ "Aristocracy?" What a fine word! Doesn't it sound elegant and graceful and genteel? I wondered if we were thinking about the same people: were the writers of this brochure thinking about those people who were running slave labor camps? Were they thinking of the same people who kidnapped workers so they would not have to pay them a fair wage? Were they describing the people who enacted laws stating that those African-American workers who tried to escape from forced labor camps were to be punished by dismemberment?¹⁶ What a fine term, "aristocracy"—and how carefully and deceitfully it hides a cruel past!¹⁷

I gave up on the flyer, and turned to *Williamsburg: Great Entertainer Magazine*, the official visitors' guide of the Williamsburg Hotel/Motel Association.¹⁸ Glancing through the first twenty

13. See WILLIAMSBURG, JAMESTOWN, YORKTOWN: VIRGINIA'S HISTORIC TRIANGLE (1997).

14. See *id.*

15. See *id.*

16. See THAD W. TATE, THE NEGRO IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WILLIAMSBURG 177, 188-89, 188 n.55 (1965).

17. For a description of life in a Virginia slave labor camp written by a person forced to live and work there, see Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman*, in FOUR FUGITIVE SLAVE NARRATIVES (Robin W. Winks gen. ed., Addison-Wesley 1969) (1857).

18. See WILLIAMSBURG: GREAT ENTERTAINER MAGAZINE, Spring 1998 [hereinafter

pages, which focused exclusively on Williamsburg, I noticed that only one of the eight pictures which portrayed people in colonial garb showed African-Americans. My first thought, then, was that the African-American population in Williamsburg during that period must have been very small.

The magazine had an essay on history entitled *Colonial Williamsburg: Virginia's Colonial Capital Comes Alive*.¹⁹ The first part of that essay did not mention either African-Americans or slave laborers in the community.²⁰ There was a reference to the "defiant speeches" Patrick Henry gave in Williamsburg,²¹ which reminded me that Henry, like almost half of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, lived a fine life off the workers in his slave labor camp.²² It reminded me also that the best one could say about Patrick Henry in this regard was that when he died, he bequeathed to his children not only all the people whom he had kidnapped and held in bondage, but also his ambivalence about slavery.²³ Of course, there was no reminder of this to the tourist.

The next section of the essay on history was entitled *The Workplace*.²⁴ Again, I looked in vain for any mention that some of these workers had been African-American. Although the author discussed "men and women" who worked in the crafts, business, trade, government, and military, she did not mention African-Americans until the next section, *Minorities: Blacks and Women*,²⁵ suggesting a bizarre discontinuity between those who worked, and those who were black.

WILLIAMSBURG].

19. See *id.* at 12-21.

20. This is not precisely true, as the very last sentence of this 30-paragraph section tells the tourist that "[w]hether discussing the roles of women and blacks, business, commerce and government, or entertainment and leisure, Colonial Williamsburg's tours and programs offer a broader understanding of Williamsburg culture." *Id.* at 16.

21. *Id.* at 12.

22. See JAMES W. LOEWEN, *LIES MY TEACHER TOLD ME: EVERYTHING YOUR AMERICAN HISTORY TEXTBOOK GOT WRONG* 139 (1995).

23. See *id.* at 342 n.34 ("Let us transmit to our descendants," he wrote, "together with our slaves, a pity for their unhappy lot, and an abhorrence of slavery.").

24. See WILLIAMSBURG, *supra* note 18, at 16.

25. See *id.*

The section entitled *Minorities: Blacks and Women*, had only four short paragraphs on blacks in Williamsburg.²⁶ The first explained that the vast majority of blacks in eighteenth century Virginia were "born into slavery," and the second described how to calculate the value of an enslaved person to "the master."²⁷ Paragraph three told of the work performed by "slaves," stated that they were rarely able to leave the home of their master, and noted that Sunday was the only time "slaves" had to "visit one another and trade gossip or news."²⁸ I was stunned by the ease with which the writer trivialized the lives of African-Americans in that community! Was he really suggesting that they did not educate their children, argue politics, celebrate religion, fight in the Revolution, care for their elderly, petition for freedom, struggle against tyranny, or plot escapes? Apparently so.²⁹

But, it was the last of the four paragraphs that sent my head reeling, for it was there that I read these words: "to illustrate the lives of slaves in 18th century Virginia, Colonial Williamsburg offers an innovative tour called the '*Other Half Tour*.'"³⁰ I was quite simply struck dumb.

After suggesting time and again that there were very few African-Americans in Colonial Williamsburg, and that those few were trivial people who did marginal work, people who somehow were not even "workers," the authors finally admitted, in a phrase hidden at the end of the section, that the population of Williamsburg in the eighteenth century was half black! I was stupefied, appalled, beyond disgust.

Now let's talk about autonomy. Let's talk about "moral authenticity, integrity or distinct self-identity"; let's talk about the struggle to maintain a "moral system that is [one's] own," the

26. See *id.* at 16, 18.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.* at 18.

29. For a history of blacks in Colonial Williamsburg that describes their work in homes, restaurants, vineyards and factories; their celebration of weddings and struggle to maintain family ties; their role in the colonists' rebellion; the establishment of the first black church in America; as well as uprisings and individual violence against slave owners, see GERALD W. MULLIN, *FLIGHT AND REBELLION: SLAVE RESISTANCE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY VIRGINIA* (1972), and TATE, *supra* note 16.

30. See WILLIAMSBURG, *supra* note 18, at 18.

effort "to maintain rational self-direction in a world populated by impinging judgments."³¹

First of all, it is staggering to imagine the terrible damage the white community in Williamsburg did to itself when it enacted, enforced, and supported laws that permitted the enslavement of fellow humans, as well as the dismemberment and castration of African-Americans who tried to escape from bondage. Let's also talk about the men and women who wrote this material, people whom I presume to be white, or to be paid by white Americans; and let's talk also about the white Americans who come to Williamsburg to learn history, and learn this history. How hard is it for them to exercise autonomy within a culture that works so hard to create and maintain categories we call "race"? How dependent are white Americans on the existence of this group, black Americans, that they keep on the bottom? How much energy do white Americans expend daily to create and maintain this twisted fantasy of America's past and present? Given this context, to what extent can white Americans distinguish their own norms from those strong social norms that structure their consciousness?

And does anyone really think that this is easier for white Americans to do than it is for blacks?

I maintain that white Americans, perhaps even more than black Americans, are constrained by their need for dependence and dominance. I maintain that this need for dependence and dominance desperately limits the ability of white Americans "to achieve moral independence." Black Americans maintain a fierce and daily struggle with the American system of lies and distortions that shape our daily existence: failure to do so would mean certain psychological death. White America, on the other hand, needs to maintain a complicated system of lies in order to maintain its dominance: every system of oppression needs an ideology to justify its cruelty.

And it does not make any sense at all, it does not serve the purposes of decency and humanity at all, to suggest that it is our lives, the lives of black Americans, which are distorted by

31. Abrams, *supra* note 1, at 4.

these lies and this cruelty, while the lives of those who create the lies and perpetrate the cruelty, are left untouched.

The feminist theory on which Professor Abrams bases her analysis is flawed, because it maintains that people who are oppressed—here, women—find it more problematic to achieve autonomy than do their oppressors. As a result, Abrams's analysis, which compares this flawed theory with the liberal norm of autonomy, is not sound.

Post Script

I wish I did not have more to write here, because I wish that the lies and distortion would stop. But they do not stop in America, and they certainly did not stop in Williamsburg that weekend.

I finally gave up on learning more about the African-American experience in Williamsburg: I already had learned more than I wanted to know that weekend. I presented these comments at the conference on Friday, and decided to avoid Colonial Williamsburg on Saturday by going shopping instead. Green can sometimes trump black in this country, and a day at the mall sounded like a good escape. Indeed, it was. It was not until I returned to the village of Williamsburg, and sat down in a restaurant to order dinner, that America's lies and distortions smacked me again.

The restaurant was decorated with old advertisements from the American past. As I gazed around the room, waiting for the waiter to bring the food, my eyes stopped . . . my heart stopped . . . when I saw an ad for honey that had only one image: the pickaninny, with shiny black skin, huge red lips, enormous white eyes, tufts of nappy hair. The sign had these three words: "honey? sho am!" My stomach recoiled. I left the table to look for the hotel manager to complain about this insult. Oddly enough, however, it was the manager who seemed insulted: how could there be anything in his restaurant that was disrespectful to black Americans if he had never noticed it? If no one had complained before? He was, after all, from the North. He asked me to take him to the restaurant to see the poster, and I did. He

looked at it for a few minutes, then said: "Well, it looks like a bear to me. Are you sure it isn't a bear?"

The next morning I left Williamsburg. Despite the kindness of the conference organizers and participants, I was glad to leave. When I stopped in the hotel gift shop to pick up a newspaper, I saw a lovely, brown-skinned doll wearing colonial garb. It was so healing to see her pretty face after the image of the night before, that I picked her up to see how she was made and to look at the detail in her clothing. Then I noticed a little card attached to her wrist. I opened it, and read these words:

Hello! My name is Eve. Just like me, more than half the people living in Williamsburg were African or African-American by the eve of the American Revolution. My people were brought to America as slaves from Africa and the West Indies. Our African customs and strong sense of community have influenced everything in Williamsburg and grown into a special culture.

I live in the capital city of Williamsburg in a house near the Governor's Palace. In the daytime, I help the other slaves with daily chores. I grind spices and herbs, fetch water, wash dishes, and help set and clear the table for meals. In the afternoon, my older sister watches over me to make sure I dust and clean really well.

I have fun too - I like to play handclap and rhyming games and marbles with the owner's children. Most of all, I look forward to Saturday evening and Sunday when my family and friends gather for reunions, music, dance, and storytelling. We have so much fun!³²

Well, I guess this must be progress, because by now the writer is admitting that the African-American population was the majority population in Colonial Williamsburg,³³ and it was really white people who were "the minority." And boy, these enslaved children seemed to be having as much fun as their gossiping parents, who somehow are working as slave laborers because they "were brought" to America as slaves: no active verb here! Certainly white Americans in Williamsburg did not take any

32. COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUND., EVE (1998) (card on file with author).

33. *See id.*

action to maintain this system. Like Topsy, these enslaved people “just grew.” I guess someone had to keep these folks at the master’s house doing his work, but, by golly, that wasn’t white folks either, was it? Indeed, it appears that these enslaved people enforced the slave labor system on themselves: wasn’t it Eve’s sister who supervised her work? The white folks were just somehow part of the fun, because we know now that Eve liked to play games with the children of the people who enslaved her and her family: “We have so much fun!” Apparently this “Eve” had nothing in common with an Eve who really existed, an enslaved woman filled with passion and rage whom white Virginians burned at the stake after she poisoned her “master.”³⁴

Knowing full well what I would find on the arm-tag of the white doll sitting next to Eve, I opened it nonetheless:

Betsey has different clothes to suit the different places she’ll go and the people she’ll see. She wears “dress” clothing to a party or to visit the Palace. “Undress” is what she wears every day. In the eighteenth century, these words had very different meanings from the way we use them today.

Betsey wears her fancy “dress” gown at parties, or when she visits at the Governor’s Palace. She dons a pretty green outfit with bright purple flowers. The attached stomacher, a brightly colored petticoat, and sleeves ending in graceful flounces create a very fashionable look. Her gown has a full, wide skirt held in place by hoops tied around her waist. Betsey’s hoops make it tricky for her to go through a doorway, sit, or even ride in a carriage! As finishing touches, Betsey dresses her hair with ribbons, pearls and flowers, and exchanges her sturdy shoes and stockings for delicate slippers and fine white silk stockings.³⁵

I suppose I could have noticed that Betsey does not speak for herself, that she has no existence outside of how she looks, and that her clothing has been designed to make it virtually impossible for her to move. I was too busy, however, noting the way in which Betsey had no racial identity, and had absolutely no rela-

34. See TATE, *supra* note 16, at 184.

35. COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUND., BETSEY’S BALL GOWN (1997) (card on file with author).

tionship at all with Eve or with any enslaved person. How is it possible that Eve plays with her, yet she doesn't play with Eve? Eve grinds spices, fetches water, washes dishes, and sets the table for Betsey's family so that Betsey can get ready for the ball, yet somehow no one is doing these things. Isn't it amazing that someone makes the fabric for her ball gown, dyes it green, sews the gown, creates purple fabric flowers and attaches them to the dress, washes the petticoat and gown and "fine white silk stockings" and hangs them out to dry, irons the gown and the ribbons, polishes her "delicate slippers," and, at the same time, no one does any of those things?³⁶

On Eve's card, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation tells us that it has "chosen not to hide or ignore" slavery, this "difficult chapter in America's past," in order "to help the future learn from the past."³⁷ I think it is bad enough that this organization wants to congratulate itself for producing such a distorted version of American history. What is even worse, however, is that the organization put this statement only on Eve's card, and not on Betsey's, suggesting once more that slavery was only about black Americans. White Americans were not implicated then, just as they somehow are not implicated in racism now.

All the themes surrounding moral autonomy are thus reprised here. Just imagine what the white restaurant owner had to do to his mind to be able to see only a picture of a bear. Think of the white person who wrote the copy for the notecards, and how she must have struggled with her mind to see black Americans as happy slaves and at the same time not to see slaveowners at all. Then think about the fact that these distorted images are fed to us all subliminally, in places like restaurant walls. They are fed to us early on, in the dolls that were selected for us as children, and in the ideology attached to the dolls' little arms. They are fed to us over and over, day after day, year after year.

36. It is very unlikely that "Betsey's" family was not implicated in the slave labor system. Williamsburg was linked with slavery from its inception: five-sixths of white families in the town enslaved Africans or African-Americans. See TATE, *supra* note 16, at 55. There were frequent slave auctions in Williamsburg, generally held in front of the Raleigh Tavern. See *id.* at 79-84.

37. COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUND., *supra* note 32.

The dance of dependence and domination is a dance for two, and the search for moral independence in America becomes harder and harder, especially for those who insist so desperately on power and control.