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Can misandric aggression be accommodated within Smith's Theory of Dehumanization and Monstrosity?

Can Misandric Aggression be Accommodated within Smith's Theory of Dehumanization and Monstrosity?

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Introduction

Over the last decade, David Livingstone Smith has committed himself to develop a psychological theory of dehumanization. Unlike earlier theories of dehumanization which sought to document the historical events and describe the sociological conditions that precipitate genocides (Fein 1979, 1990), Smith interrogates the thought processes through which humans dehumanize groups they believe to be outside of, and without, humanity. Smith's research provides insights as well as claims that could well be contested by Black philosophers working through the implications and consequences of anti-Black racism. Philosophers and race theorists generally do not engage in contemporary discussions debating the relationship between racism, dehumanization, and genocides. While there are some notable exceptions focusing on the role settler colonialism has in unsettling many of the Eurocentric notions of genocide and the processes of dehumanization (Rodriguez 2015, Meiches 2019), or the relationship that slavery has to the dehumanizing violence of the Holocaust (Thomas 1993), a specific philosophy of dehumanization is yet to be fully explored or debated within Black philosophy or Critical Race Theory. I believe theories of racism suffer from this failure to address or contest contemporary theories of dehumanization since many, if not most, of the most powerful historical examples of dehumanization involve—or more accurately depend—on processes of racialization or ethnicization as the condition of mass violence (Moses 2002; Sidanius & Pratto 1999).

This brief commentary will summarize Smith's argument for his theory of dehumanization and ask questions about his theory given the dependence many of his examples have on misandric caricatures of groups that emerge once demonization and monstrosities are considered. Philosophers often take great pleasure in scrutinizing the ideas or concepts put forward by theorists as if the exactitude of abstraction is the ultimate stake one has in *theory*. I however read Smith's research as a provocation to think about how one develops a philosophical account of the motivations behind dehumanizing acts, slurs, and events such as slavery, lynching, or the Holocaust. Smith (2011) has attempted to convince his readers that dehumanization is "a joint creation of biology, culture, and the architecture of the human mind" (p. 4), that "acts as a psychological lubricant, dissolving our inhibitions and inflaming our destructive passions" (p.13). The cognitive disinhibition facilitated by dehumanization also frees the mind to create and imagine the threats of others pose to oneself and one's group. Black Male Studies scholars have explored this process through misandric caricatures, while Smith (2021) has described this as demonizing dehumanization (p.251). In the following commentary, I wish

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to highlight what I take to be fruitful parallels between Smith's account of demonic dehumanization and misandric caricatures and productive points of divergence.

Dehumanization 101: The Foundation of Smith's Dehumanization Theory

Since *Less than Human* (2011), Smith has taken sub-humanity to be a central and organizing theme in his research. According to Smith, "Subhumans, it was believed, are beings that lack that special something that makes us human. Because of this deficit, they don't command the respect that we, the truly human beings, are obliged to grant one another. They can be enslaved, tortured, or even exterminated—treated in ways in which we could not bring ourselves to treat those whom we regard as members of our own kind" (p.2) Immediately racism springs to the mind of many scholars, especially in the United States, as the term par excellence of dehumanization. Almost intuitively one could earnestly assert that the genocides and atrocities towards humanity found throughout the 20th century owe their origin to racism. Smith does explain that "Dehumanization feeds on racism, [and] without racism, it probably couldn't exist (p.8). However, he does not want to simply reduce dehumanization to racism. While dehumanization is dependent on and related to racism, it also has a distinctiveness that cannot simply be captured by terms such as racism, objectification, othering, or alienation. For Smith (2020), "To dehumanize others is to think of them not merely as inferior human beings, but as subhuman creatures" (p.22). Smith (2021) wants a theory of dehumanization that "specifies the social and psychological force that produce and sustain certain forms of cruelty and injustice, one that addresses the most hideous things that human beings do to one another" (p.10). This of course presumes genocidal violence, racial oppression, and war as with many previous debates within the literature, however, Smith also wants a concept of dehumanization that can account for bias (p.10). This theory of dehumanization must also be distinct from other terms and concepts such as racism, othering, or sexual objectification and capable of being verified through scientific explanation (p.10). Ultimately, Smith aims to defend a theory of dehumanization that is compatible with "some of the most important vernacular uses of the term" without excluding paradigmatic cases of dehumanization such as the "treatment of prisoners at Auschwitz and the lynching of African-Americans" (p.11).

Smith is interested in a functional theory of dehumanization that explains what it is just as much as how it operates in the real world rather than a philosophical interpretation of dehumanization that can describe the events popularly thought to exemplify dehumanization. This is apparent in how Smith deals with the issue of slurs and their relationship to dehumanization. Smith aims to disassociate symptoms of dehumanization from dehumanization itself. As he writes: "When people assume too tight a connection between dehumanization and slurs, they commit the category mistake of confusing a cause with its effects. Suppose you were to mistake the symptoms of a cold—runny nose, sore throat, headache, and so on—for the cold itself. You would be wrong if you thought of a cold as nothing but a bundle of symptoms" (p.16). Dehumanization is the process of sub-humanization, a process that achieves in the world, through violence and negation, the creation of the non-human entities imagined by the oppressing group.

Some philosophers seem to believe that it is impossible to truly think of biological humans as subhuman animals or non-humans. Smith rejects this view since he believes "when people dehumanize others, they do conceive of them as subhumans, and that when these dehumanizing attitudes are expressed in speech, they are meant to be literally descriptive. When Nazis conceived of Jews as vermin, and when White supremacists thought of Africans as apes, they really meant that Jews and Africans are less than human (pp.18-19). Phillip A. Goff et al.'s (2008) study which is also cited by Smith actually provides a powerful demonstration of the process by which Black male faces are identified with ape faces, but how these two different primes (Black male faces and white male faces) would be related to apes. The first study of the five presented by Goff et al. (2008) "examined the Black–ape association…by measuring whether the mere presence of Black male faces facilitates identification of ape images" (p.294). Philosophers often presume what is said by oppressors or groups with the power to dehumanize can serve as a useful indication of how the target group is thought about within the minds of the oppressor class. As such, whether or not a rational individual truly *believes* what is being said facilitates a philosophical analysis of the reasonability or rationality held by the individuals who comprise the oppressor class. However, this is not a very useful or verifiable measure of *intent*, or more importantly, *perception*. Not only did study 1 find that Black male faces became linked to ape-like images while white male faces did not, but Goff et al. (2008) also reported that:

> participants not only exhibited a Black–ape facilitation effect but also exhibited a White–ape inhibition effect as well. This unanticipated White–ape inhibition effect may have resulted from a negative association between Whites and apes. That is, if Blacks are mentally represented as less evolved (and therefore closer to apes), then Whites dominant group perceive Black male targets" (pp. 296-297).

Implicit bias research has explained that the association between the Negro and ape is not simply an abstract and detached stereotype, but rather a historical trope used to justify the dehumanization of Black people and motivate degradation and violence against the group targeted for dehumanization. While Goff et al. (2008) define dehumanization as "a method by which individuals and social groups are targeted for cruelty, social degradation, and state-sanctioned violence" (p.305), and Smith (2021, 2019) defines dehumanization as an imposition of sub-humanity upon the target what is central to Smith's analysis is how the subordinate target is perceived by the dominant/superior group and how this group rationalizes and motivates violence against the subordinate target. Philosophers often ignore the empirical evidence which shows that humanity is not merely evaluated by the degree to which it is afforded to bodies, but by its sterling quality—its inability to be sullied or diminished by its association with that which is non-human. As Harris and Fiske (2006) explain in their study on neuroimaging and dehumanization "Not all prejudices are equal…[and] members of some social groups seem to be dehumanized, at least as indicated by the absence of the typical neural signature for social cognition" (pp.847 & 852). So, in contrast to the philosophical debates concerning the believability of any dehumanized group truly being not human in the eyes of the oppressing group, there is scientific evidence to show that some groups are not perceived as social beings at all within the minds of dehumanizers.

Smith's argument about the nature of dehumanization, whether or not it can be reduced to slurs, metaphors, or objectification, is important to race theorists and other scholars interested in inequality because it demands a bright line by which concepts are to be measured and regarded *given their actual effect in the world.* As a scholar of dehumanization, Smith correctly rejects views that aim to flatten and (mis-)appropriate dehumanization as a rhetorical provocation that draws attention to a political cause or group identity. He plainly states that objectification and degrading treatment are not synonymous by consequence or concept to dehumanization (pp.23-24) because "the act of dehumanizing others facilitates atrocities. It stands to these atrocities as cause stands to effect and because causes are by definition distinct from their effects, dehumanization cannot be identified with the atrocities themselves and their harmful effects" (pp.24-25). Dehumanization then ignites a call towards eradicating the threat or evil the very existence of the subordinate targets. The process of dehumanization then demands that the origin of humanity stand in opposition to entities and bodies that are *perceived* to be threats to the existence of that which is human be it life, values, or society itself. This causal relationship to violence, murder, and atrocity distinguishes dehumanization from the aforementioned forms of marginalization.

Attention to the perception dominant groups have of subordinate groups who are targets of dehumanization frees dehumanization from the unverifiability of the humanist presupposition. It is idealistic and hopeful to say that there is humanity denied by subordinate groups who suffer from extreme forms of violence and disregard in society. While this is certainly contested throughout the dehumanization literature (Steizinger 2018), such debates presuppose a given-ness or obviousness of one's humanity, this is not the case for some groups such as Blacks or African people who were classified as animals for centuries (Wynter 1992, 2018; Warren 2018; Curry 2017; Mills 1998) however, the idea of attributing human characteristics to non-human entities or animals is not impossible. Future research should attend to both the historical accuracy of Smith's analysis as well as the resistance and inapplicability of traditional interpretations of dehumanization presumption of the human (Wynter 2001; Curry 2017, 2018).

Among Black anti-humanists and Black Male Studies scholars, whose primary areas of research reside in the violence motivated by Blackness and/or Black maleness, belief and intent matter little when compared to perception and action. The debate between Smith and his detractors seems to revolve around the degree to which the human can be replaced by the subhuman. Is this a matter of degree to where the human is lessened by dehumanization or is it as Smith argues a complete imposition of the subhuman such that there is no human of which one can speak once dehumanization occurs? The question before philosophers in this matter is one of transubstantiation. The question of how a body transforms from one substance into another, or from the human to the subhuman. Here some of the anti-humanist literature can assist in how one thinks through the schematic foundations of humanism and how such conceptual schemas are taken as the starting point of analysis.

Sylvia Wynter (2018, 2006) argues that the bio-centric representation of Western MAN, or the human, is merely a cultural creation, where biology explains the processes of a body that can only be explained within a schema of Eurocentric reason and capitalist acquisition. Drawing

inspiration from Frantz Fanon, Wynter (1992) suggests that racism culminates into processes of dehumanization which vacate the presence of *being* or human-ness from Black (male) bodies. Specifically discussing the violence the L.A. police department uses against poor Black males she explains that the dehumanization of these Black men occurs because the police see young Black males as No Humans Involved. Here Wynter does not merely suggest that the LAPD calling Black men N.H.I. is an insult, but how the language conditions white police to view the Black male body through an absence—a distortion of what it is in the world that is represented within the cultural scheme of the police as lacking humanity, savage, and dangerous. Analyzing the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, Wynter suggests that the distortion of bodies and populations such that these bodies and peoples are demonized and re-present-ed as evil within the schema or the worldview of the oppressing group is what Black Male Studies scholars mean by *caricatures*. Caricatures are the simultaneous distortion and disassembling of subordinate group members such that they are transformed into a coherent entity within the schema of the dominant group. In *Black Skin white Masks*, Frantz Fanon (2008) describes being a victim of this gaze when he says "I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self" (p.109). Caricatures are thereby the products of disassembly and the result of transubstantiation. The dehumanized target is perceived not as human like the HUMAN of the dominant group. Rather *he* is perceived as the opposite, the negation, the contradiction, of the anthropos that has come to be the *Human*.

The Black man is "a phobogenic object, as stimulus to anxiety," writes Frantz Fanon (2008, p.151). Contact with a subordinate target of dehumanization produces a schism within the conceptual schema of the oppressor's consciousness. The oppressing group must disassociate the inferiority of the subordinate group from its most foundational categories. The human, man, woman, and child have traditionally held moral as well as a historical value within most modern societies. These categories establish kinship and roles that place one within a particular in-group. The subordinate group targeted for dehumanization often are denied access to these categories. They are not men, women, and children, but are some degraded forms of these terms that pose a threat to the dominant group's conceptualization of themselves and their very existence.

In the "Pathology of Race Prejudice," E. Franklin Frazier (1927) explains that "just as in the insane any pertinent stimulus may arouse the whole complex, so any idea connected with the Negro causes the whole Negro-complex to be projected into consciousness" (p. 857). Frazier defined the Negro-complex as a "system of ideas which most Southerners have respecting the Negro, which has the same intense emotional tone that characterizes insane complexes" (p.857). Frazier argues that Southerners imagine the Negro male to be the savage incarnation of white terror. This is especially strong regarding the white female's desire for the Negro male. A beast she was never admitted to desire. To maintain the innocence and moral superiority of the dominant group, the subordinate group is made into a caricature where their savagery and sub-humanity are projected by the schema of the dominant group onto the world. Frazier explains the myth of the Black rapist through this account. He writes:

Perhaps more justly to be classed as symptoms of insanity are those frequent hallucinations of white women who complain of attacks by Negroes when clearly no

Negroes are involved. Hallucinations often represent unacceptable sexual desires which are projected when they can no longer be repressed. In the South, a desire on the part of a white woman for a Negro that could no longer be repressed would most likely be projected, — especially when such a desire is supposed to be as horrible as incest. It is not unlikely, therefore, that imaginary attacks by Negroes are often projected wishes (p. 861).

In short, dehumanization can also be accounted for through processes of transubstantiation whereby the human can be disassembled and transmuted into negative entities that stand against the anthropos of the dominant group. In some cases, the literature supposes that attributing deceit and dishonesty to the Jew within Nazi propaganda or irrationality and insatiability to the Negro in Jim Crow era propaganda affords these groups a degree of human character, no matter how degraded it may be. This is a problem that I believe can be discussed and debated from various vantage points, and perhaps could be more easily resolved by appealing to decolonial accounts and anti-humanist analyses.

On Misandric Caricatures

In the first few pages of *Making Monsters*, the reader is confronted with the brutish reality of dehumanization—the lynching of Henry Smith and Sam Hose. Smith goes through great effort to detail the horror of the lynchings in the United States. It is not insignificant that Smith documents the lynching of two Black men in the opening pages of his book. Lynchings in the United States was used as rituals of social enjoyment and white supremacist power throughout the 19th and 20th century. The Equal Justice Initiative Report (2017) commissioned by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), "documented 4084 racial terror lynchings in twelve Southern states between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and 1950" (p.4). Black men comprised roughly 95% of the victims of lynchings during this period as the number of Black women lynched between 1838 and 1969 is estimated to be around 188 (Baker and Garcia 2019).

Smith explains that the "descriptions of Hose were virtually indistinguishable from those that had been used to characterize Smith six years previously. He was a 'fiend incarnate,' a 'monster in human form,' a 'black brute whose carnival of blood and lust has brought death and desolation,' and a 'fiendish beast,' and his punishment was every bit as horrific" (p.5). The lynching of Sam Hose lasted almost half an hour. While Mr. Hose was still alive "a man stepped forward and very matter-of-factly sliced off Hose's ears. Then several men grabbed Hose's arms and held them forward so his fingers could be severed one by one and shown to the crowd. Finally, a blade was passed between his thighs, Hose cried out in agony, and a moment later his genitals were held aloft" (p.5). After Mr. Hose died his heart and liver were removed and his body was disassembled for collector items. Mr. Hose's incarcerated corpse was then cut into small pieces, his bones broken and the fragments collected. This was part of the ritual of lynching performed by white men and women who took pleasure in the murder of Black males and sold the remains of his body for top dollar. Quoting at length from an editorial entitled "Negro Tortured and Burned to Death at Stake," in the *San Francisco Call* (1899), Smith writes:

…"Small pieces of bones went for 25 cents, and a bit of the liver crisply cooked sold for 10 cents. As soon as the negro was seen to be dead there was a tremendous struggle among the crowd, which had witnessed his tragic end, to secure the souvenirs. A rush was made for the stake, and those near the body were forced against it and had to fight for their freedom. Knives were quickly produced and soon the body was dismembered." Hose's ears, nose, and penis, which were cut off before the fire started, were especially prized items. A set of his knuckles was displayed for sale in the window of an Atlanta grocery store (p.5).

Smith is quite clear that Black men's dehumanization throughout history revolved around the demonization of Black men where lynching and the mutilation of their physical bodies were seen as morally good and beneficial to society because it eliminated an evil doer—a rapist beast. Smith writes:

Black men were not just seen as animals. The extremes of rage and contempt, the efforts to degrade and humiliate the victims, and the pleasure that the White mob took in causing them the maximum amount of suffering in the name of "justice" before letting death free them from their torment are not typical of how human beings treat the animals that they hunt and eat. Smith and Hose were demonized as what would be called a century later "superpredators"—fiends who are devoid of conscience and intent on satisfying their insatiable appetites for rape, murder, and mayhem (p. 6).

Black men are seen as monsters according to Smith's analysis. He explains that this kind of dehumanization which he calls demonizing dehumanization makes monsters of men. "When people are dehumanized in this way, they are regarded as sinister and malevolent. It is in these cases that the problem of monstrosity arises," explains Smith (2021, p. 251). Monstrosity not only places the dehumanized outside of one's moral community but imagines those who are subhuman as evildoers that must be eliminated for the safety and security of one's kind. This level of dehumanization, as evidenced by images, historical accounts of mutilation, and the records of death, seems to target men more so that women.

Over the last several decades, there has been a small but impactful literature base analyzing the sex-selective killing and demonization of subordinate male groups within conflicts, genocides, and repressive racist regimes. Some authors have suggested that subordinate male groups or outgroup males have been excluded from kinship and racial bonds of the dominant group throughout the history of conquest. By effect, males who do not originate within or have kinship ties to the dominant racial, ethnic, or cultural group have been demonized and perceived as a threat to the biological reproduction and cultural salience of the superior group. Consequently, the group subject to many of the most dehumanizing stereotypes and violence throughout history will be comprised of these males who are from outgroups but are seen as threats to the dominant group. As Professor Errol Miller explained several decades ago, "Patriarchy has historically marginalized men not covered by the covenant of kinship… Throughout history, such men have been perceived as threats and treated as such. Patriarchy's treatment of such men has always been more brutal and harsh than its treatment of women. This contradictory and inconsistent feature of patriarchy has been mostly ignored" (1991, p. 342). The

exclusion of non-kinship or outgroup men as a feature of conflict and assimilation can be traced back to antiquity. According to the work of Adam Jones, the sex-specific killing of non-combatant males remains the most enduring feature of all human conflicts from antiquity to the present. The murder of subordinate males is not the only feature observed in modern genocides according to Jones, and so is the discomfort of genocidal regimes to subject women and children to the same brutality that men endure. Jones (2000) explains that "The development of the mass killing of Jews and others on the Eastern Front by poison gas, in specially designed vans, was also apparently a response to the reluctance some executioners felt to killing women (p.203). Following the work of the historian Christopher R. Browning on this point who argued that: "When confronted in mid-August with the complaints about the terrible psychological cost to his men of killing women and children, Himmler ordered his crime lab scientists to experiment with killing methods that would be "more humane" for his executioners. These experiments led directly to the gas vans, which went into use in the death camp at Chelmno in early December [1941]" (p.81).

This qualitative difference between the extent of violence and bodily mutilation has been substantiated throughout the 20th century in wars, genocides, and apartheid racial regimes (Sidanius & Pratto 1999). Black Male Studies scholars describe this tendency to mutilate, demonize, and murder racially subordinate males as misandric aggression, whereby the lethal extermination of the dehumanized male serves to group civil morality and provide group coherence and identity. So in the case of the lynching of Mr. Sam Hose his death was understood to be a social good because a savage beast who could harm white women and children was murdered, and insofar as the superior white group was also morally superior the killing of an immoral beast brings about good in the world. The murder of Black males, in this case, was a demonstration of the white race's moral superiority and goodness regardless of the brutality involved in such acts. Smith's analysis of demonization is interesting to Black Male Studies scholars because it not only involves misandric aggression but provides a possible way to discuss how the murder of Black and Jewish males historically not only precipitates death but sexualization. Just as the Jewish male spread pestilence and disease through his penis he was also thought to be *not-man* and menstruate. Similarly, the Black male was thought to be a rapist but was nonetheless a historical victim of rape by white men and women throughout slavery and the Jim Crow South. In a recent article, I document the rape of Jewish men during the Holocaust as part of the dehumanization process and argue for an understanding of dehumanization and genocidal violence as a rupturing of the categories which comprise the human (Curry 2020). Given the claims made by Smith and his analysis of monstrosity, I would be interested in hearing how his account deals with misandric aggression, specifically how we explain the targeting of subordinate outgroup men and boys for initial mass killings, the disproportionate representation of males as caricatures of demonization in Nazi propaganda and other demonization literature in wars, repressive regimes, etc., and lastly is there a way to explain the sexualization and rape of these males given Smith's account of monstrosity. How and why would genocidal or murderous regimes enact dehumanization as through rape towards men and boys if these are truly monsters and aversions to the humanity of the dominant group?

Conclusion

Smith's *Making Monsters* is a welcomed contribution to race theory and dehumanization studies. His work opens numerous theoretical possibilities and debates concerning the nature of sub-humanity, while illuminating problems in how philosophers have come to think about the nature of dehumanization more broadly. While there have been numerous conversations concerning racism, sexism, and discrimination by philosophers over the last several decades, very few of those conversations are driven by the rigorous historical or psychological account of the oppressing class. Smith offers a topology of dehumanization—its nature and consequence—that will benefit research in this area for decades to come.

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