In Social Justice Discourse, Normal Is Good (Again)

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Using a program that directly streams her computer screen onto mine, I watch Ruby scroll through her Tumblr dashboard—a visual cacophony of endlessly cascading text and images. In the folk geography of the internet, Tumblr is known as the domain of so-called "Social Justice Warriors." Ruby is one of the many young people in the United States who credit this social media platform with shaping "like all of my politics and morals and views about what the world should be like." However, these visions of a just world emerging from online social justice discourses have been undergoing a largely unremarked upon, but very significant shift. Previously, the young social justice advocates I spoke with on Tumblr approached social justice as a project of challenging categories and standards, and viewed the very idea of normal as fundamentally oppressive. However, instead of doing away with the concept of normal, Ruby and her like-minded peers now seem to be engaged in a project of creating a **new** normal.

Ruby stops scrolling at a post about #MeToo. "I try to tag everything that can hurt my followers," she narrates, moving the cursor to click **reblog**,

"like mentions of rape, or self-harm, or the 'Q' slur."

"The 'Q' slur?" I question, watching as *#rape mention, #abuse mention* show up below the post, one letter at a time.

"Yeah, you know," her voice takes on a lilted mocking quality, "queer."

I'm struck by both the utterance itself and its prosody. In previous interactions, whenever Ruby uttered words perceived as taboo or harmful, she lowered her voice, saying the words quickly and quietly—allowing them only the most fleeting existence. In contrast, Ruby articulates "queer" with a derisive tone more often used by alt-right YouTubers than 21-year-old lesbian women with stated commitments to social justice. Compounding my surprise, when I began investigating ethical formation on Tumblr in 2013, queer was used abundantly and gleefully by my interlocutors. However, Ruby's comment was not an outlier. In the last few years, I have watched this distaste for queer increasingly expressed in many popular Tumblr posts, such as

friendly reminder that q*eer is a slur and if you use it you can go choke

Contention over this word is not novel in and of itself; it is a well-trod discussion in many LGBTQ+ spaces. However, I posit that for these particular young people, this shift from celebrating to vilifying the word *queer* is emblematic of a broader shift in just what social justice is perceived to entail among large swaths of its youngest and most vocal advocates.

Despite its significance, this shift has been largely obscured by the fact that these young people continue to describe their political-ethical commitments using the same vocabulary. My interlocutors ubiquitously use the phrase "social justice" to describe their overarching intentions,

and they all describe themselves and the protagonists in their ethical narratives as left-wing, anti-racist, and pro-LGBT. The stances held by the antagonists in those narratives have not changed either—the moral others have been and continue to be racists, homophobes, transphobes, and anyone perceived as perpetuating social injustices. Thus, it is not immediately evident that a distinct political-ethical paradigm is emerging in this context. Nevertheless, I suggest that there is a schism, a progressively widening one, over what a countercultural otherwise founded on ideals of social justice fundamentally entails. The crux of this shift is brought more clearly into focus if we examine how moral others are portrayed. While moral others still tend to be understood as "perpetuating social injustice," the antagonists in my interlocutors' ethical narratives are increasingly characterized in a dramatically different way.

> *The sort of person the moral other is presumed to be has considerable implications for what a project of social justice would entail.*

When I began investigating political-ethical commentary on Tumblr in late 2013, moral others were often presented as devoutly adhering to hierarchical ideologies. On Tumblr today, however, it is more and more common to represent the moral other not as someone championing hierarchy and standards, but as someone fundamentally abnormal. "Freak" has become a frequent insult, and the antagonists in ethical narratives are portrayed as someone who, as one of my interlocutors describes, "is just kind of off; they are strange and unsettling and weird and irrational and it just makes you kind of uncomfy." The linguistic features used to represent the speech of the moral other provides further evidence of and insight into this change:

people be like *"Are you really going to miss possible friendships just because someone doesn't share your views on sexism and racism?"* and i'm like "ya duh lol" (Jaden's Tumblr blog 2014, emphasis mine)

jfc whenever i reblog that i always get freaks in my notes like *"bU T you sHoUlDn'T f igh t ˌˌ h ATE With H ATE;;;.."* (Ruby's Tumblr blog 2018, emphasis mine)

On the surface, the content of these two posts are similar. Both present an interaction between someone who believes no one is obligated to extend kindness and friendship to bigots and someone who disagrees. However, the voice of the moral other (emphasized in bold) has shifted markedly in how it is transcribed, from following the conventions of Standard written English to a decidedly irregular style. This is noteworthy because particular ways of speaking are associated with certain categories and qualities of people. The linguistic features used to voice particular stances thus make an argument about what sorts of persons are presumed to hold those stances. Therefore, a shift in how the speech of the moral other is represented indicates a shift in what sort of person the moral other is presumed to be.

I posit that what sort of person the moral other is presumed to be has considerable implications for what a project of social justice would entail. Within narratives that characterize antagonists as adhering to normative standards, creating a more just world requires rejecting hierarchical standards as inherently oppressive. Conversely, when moral others are constructed as freaks and weirdos, the project involves creating a new normal—reinscribing who and what is considered normal, while nevertheless maintaining a moral hierarchy of normal over abnormal. However, before the boundaries of normal and abnormal—acceptable and unacceptable—can be enforced, they must be defined. Thus, enacting social justice comes to largely consist of participating in heated clashes

over just where these boundaries are located.

A few weeks after Ruby defines "Q-slur" for me, I raise the topic with Jaden, who identifies as nonbinary/pansexual and whose blog description reads: "*queer | black | 19 | they/them.*"

They explain, "People say [queer]'s been a slur, so saying 'the queer community' or whatever is homophobic and hurts people. That's bullshit. 'Gay' was the slur in my school. How often did I hear 'that's so gay' describing something bad? Tumblr never says we can't use gay though because it hurts people. Isn't it funny that it's only the word that includes people like me—people who don't neatly fit—that can't be used anymore and is harmful?"

Perhaps, in a context where young people are pursuing projects of reinscribing normality, it should not be surprising that *queer*, which troubles boundaries and exceeds categories, would need to be delegitimized.

My interlocutors come to these projects though their engagement with Tumblr, but they do not remain confined there. I see the reverberations of this shift in their descriptions of contentious exchanges in their high school GSA meetings, the activist organizations they join in college, Twitter and Instagram feeds, and school cafeteria gossip. Their stories paint a picture of an ongoing and often virulent conflict, rather than a completed, totalizing conversion. This is a conflict with potentially significant implications for contemporary political discourse in the United States, particularly among young people who actively use social media. At stake for them is the heart of social justice: how it is defined, how it is to be accomplished, and what it fundamentally means to be "a good person who cares about other people."

Note: Tumblr posts have been slightly altered to ensure my interlocutors' privacy.

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