



Pelvic Politics: Sexual Dimorphism and Racial Difference

Author(s): Sally Markowitz

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Pelvic Politics: Sexual Dimorphism and Racial Difference

Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed, and planted, and gathered
into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman?
— Sojourner Truth ([1851] 1976, 235)

When the **ex-slave** Sojourner Truth put her historic question to a women's rights convention in 1851, she challenged not only male anti-feminists who would deny women full personhood on the grounds of their alleged feminine weakness but also those among her white feminist sisters for whom true womanhood required a life and complexion like their own. Mainstream feminism, sad to say, still has not managed to answer Truth satisfactorily, and it's natural to blame this failure on the continued racism of white feminists — or at least on their white solipsism, to use Adrienne Rich's (1979) gentler term. But while psychological racism may make matters worse, part of the problem surely lies, too, with the category of sex/gender difference itself, a category that has been saturated with racial meanings for centuries and not always in ways that are easy to discern. Indeed, the logic of the race/sex/gender connection in the modern West is so tangled and opaque that even the best-intentioned analysis is likely to come up short. Nor have mainstream feminist discussions of race always even acknowledged such complications. Consider, for instance, the grand, radical-feminist project of using the category of sex/gender (implicitly or explicitly) to explain racial categories (Millett 1969; Firestone 1970; Chodorow 1979),¹ or at least of understanding both in terms of some supposedly more fundamental category of Otherness (Beauvoir 1953). These days, many feminists are likely to find such an approach maddeningly

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¹ See Elizabeth Spelman's (1988) excellent discussion of these positions, which I draw on here.

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reductive and to insist instead on regarding race and sex/gender as complementary, intersecting systems. But what, exactly, does the intersection of race and sex/gender ideologies come to? Can we describe this intersection in a systematic way? These are not easy questions. At the very least, historians tell us that “scientific” classifications of race and sex have long been associated with each other: in temperament, intelligence, and physiology, so-called lower races have often provided a metaphor for the female type of humankind and females a metaphor for the “lower race” of gender (Stepan 1993). But, I argue, this analysis does not give the whole story either. While “lower” races may often be represented as feminine and the men of these races as less than masculine, the femininity of nonwhite women, far from being heightened, is likely to be denied (the better, no doubt, to justify their hard physical labor or sexual exploitation). Indeed, to talk simply about metaphorical connections between the discourses of race and sex may even be to overstate the autonomy of each. It is not difficult, after all, to find a pronounced racial component to the idea(l) of femininity itself: to be truly feminine is, in many ways, to be white. And if a woman is not white, her oppression in such crucial areas as reproductive life, sexuality, and work cannot be separated easily into discrete racial and gender components without distorting its character.² In light of such phenomena, the question is bound to arise: Might we have missed some more systematic, underlying connection between the ideologies of race and sex/gender?

I.

As in so many other matters, a look at the history of ideology — indeed, at its quite recent history — suggests a promising hypothesis: Whatever their other connections, hierarchical social classifications based on race and those based on sex/gender have long been connected through the category of sex/gender *difference*. That is to say, in dominant Western ideology a strong sex/gender dimorphism often serves as a human ideal against which different races may be measured and all but white Europeans found wanting. This ideal then functions as a measure of a racial advancement that admits of degrees determined by the (alleged) character of the relationship between men and women *within a particular race*. And so, I argue, phenomena such as femininity’s “whiteness” in dominant ideology (and, alas, in feminism) or the inextricability of the racial and sex/gender oppression in some women’s lives turn out to be elements of a larger ideological structure

² Davis 1981; Carby 1987; Collins 1990; hooks 1990.

in which sex/gender difference is imagined to increase as various races “advance.” If this is so, moreover, the ideology of sex/gender difference itself turns out to rest not on a simple binary opposition between male and female but rather on a scale of racially coded degrees of sex/gender difference culminating in the manly European man and the feminine European woman. Thus, *even in ideology*, sex/gender difference is not as binary as it might at first seem, and so the feminist project of displacing the sex/gender binary—of “thinking beyond sexual dimorphism” (to borrow from the title of a recent anthology [Herdt 1993]) by destabilizing such dimorphism or rejecting it outright—misses a very important point: An ideology that considers sexual dimorphism to be embodied only in European “races” has *already*, in a sense, thought beyond it—hardly, it starts to seem, a revolutionary accomplishment. (I shall say more about this in the article’s last section.)

The racialized notion of sex/gender difference that I explore in this article can already be detected, I suspect, in the eighteenth-century emergence of modern conceptions of race and sex/gender themselves.³ By the late nineteenth century, such racialization had become explicit and widespread. Darwin himself seriously considered it, citing the German race theorist Karl Vogt, who embraced it outright.⁴ Indeed, such a view seemed so reasonable that in 1886 the influential sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing could simply, without preamble or explanation, say, “The secondary sexual characteristics differentiate the two sexes; they present the specific male and female types. The higher the anthropological development of the race, the stronger these contrasts between man and woman” ([1886] 1965, 28). And what could make more sense? If the display of either a pronounced male or female character is the ideal to which each human is expected to conform, then it stands to reason that the men and women of the most “advanced” race(s) will meet this ideal best. That is to say, just as personhood in our social world is so thoroughly gendered that one must register unambiguously as either a man or a woman (if preferably the former) in order to count as fully human, so too must a *race* display a pronounced sex/gender dimorphism in order to qualify as “advanced.”

It would, of course, be surprising to hear this view stated so baldly to-

³ I cannot argue for this view here, but it is suggested by what early anthropologists of race have to say about sexual difference among “primitive” races, as well as by the less-than-universal character of the new, eighteenth-century notion of femininity, which applied only to bourgeois European women (see the selections in Eze 1997; as well as the discussion in Schiebinger 1993, 115–83).

⁴ Laqueur 1990 (208) claims that Darwin quotes Vogt “approvingly,” but see Darwin (1871) 1981, 2:329–30.

day, but this hardly means that such racialization has finally withered away, leaving behind an innocuous category of sex/gender dimorphism purified of racial connotations. More likely, this racialization has achieved that familiar if peculiar kind of invisibility with which contemporary liberal ideology veils race and racism themselves. No wonder, then, that contemporary white feminists have had such difficulty understanding the tangle of race and sex/gender ideology. The racial dimension of sexual dimorphism seems to have slipped just below cultural awareness, giving way, at least on the surface, to a category of sex/gender dimorphism that appears not only to be obvious and unimpeachable but also to have next to nothing to do with race.

However, the racialization of sex/gender difference has not always been so difficult to discern. Indeed, I take as my point of departure a particularly explicit and revealing expression of it by turn-of-the-century British sexologist Havelock Ellis. Perhaps second only to Freud's in shaping modern conceptions of sexuality and gender, Ellis's work has also, according to Sander Gilman (1985), been central to the modern European sexualization of African women. But even Gilman, it is worth pointing out, overlooks Ellis's more basic racialization of sex *difference*, which fairly leaps from the page once one looks for it. Indeed, that is one reason Ellis warrants attention: rather than simply assuming a racialized sex/gender dimorphism (as Krafft-Ebing, e.g., does), he develops the notion at some length, relying on it to formulate and resolve a set of paradoxes that arise from subjecting a single social world to the competing yet (one cannot help but sense) somehow complementary classifications of race and sex/gender. In particular, Ellis, late Victorian that he was, struggled to maintain a cross-racial sex classification — that is, one that divides the human world exhaustively into men and women — that did not challenge what he believed to be the hierarchical differences between the races. But how, exactly, could one square the racial superiority of European women with both their inferiority to their mates and their similarity to non-European women? And what could an English gentleman be said to share with an African or Asian male? In short, how could the distinction between the sexes both specify and justify bourgeois gender relations in particular even while applying universally across race, class, and culture (Poovey 1988)? Such questions should interest feminists, and not only for the light they shed on the conundrums that follow from a simultaneous commitment to racism and sexism. For the logic behind such questions also shapes some of the most troubling and persistent problems plaguing contemporary feminism, which must, after all, reconcile a theory and politics based on the category of sex/gender with the

profound differences among women that race makes.⁵ Ellis solved his version of these problems by racializing sex/gender difference itself, a solution that feminists can hardly borrow; indeed, such racialization is obviously part of the problem. But it is a crucial part, and one that feminists risk perpetuating by overlooking.

It is not surprising that Ellis develops his views on race and sex/gender in the context of an analysis of feminine beauty, another physiological discourse heavily freighted with ideological significance. Indeed, his analysis draws together a number of important, disparate strands—the tensions between female sexuality, domesticity, and maternity; the relationship between sex and gender; the role of race in the discourse of female beauty; anxiety about “interracial mixing”—all of which seem to converge in Ellis’s fin-de-siècle contribution to a confusing just-so story of the female pelvis that dates back to the eighteenth-century quest for the pelvic marks of racial identity and hierarchy. Not surprisingly, this story was equivocal from the start, offering various and conflicting views about what exactly constituted the racially advanced pelvis. On the one hand, some early anthropologists and physiologists claimed that the wide female pelvis (so prized later by Ellis) signified racial “primitivism,” since a generous pelvis seemed to promote the ease in childbirth supposedly enjoyed by beasts—a convenient justification for continuing to drive hard-laboring female slaves of “lower race” even when they were pregnant (Schiebinger 1993, 156–58). On the other hand, by 1826 Willem Vrolik had linked a wide pelvis with racial superiority, a view appropriated later in the century by Ellis and his ilk, who, ingeniously combining Darwinism with craniometry, insisted that as races became more advanced, their increased head size required a wider maternal pelvis to accommodate the larger skull of the racially superior infant (Gilman 1985, 90; Schiebinger 1993, 156–59).

Indeed, for Ellis and his contemporaries, the generous pelvis also promised all the delights of normative femininity: maternal fitness, gentleness, domesticity, beauty. So although I have been using the term *sex/gender difference*, it is worth emphasizing that Ellis, like his heirs the sociobiologists, regards what we have learned to call gender (a psychosocial category) as rooted firmly in sex (a physiological one). Thus, what is racialized for Ellis and others is not just *gender* difference, the various degrees and manifestations of which might reasonably be thought to depend on culture, but

⁵ The most systematic conceptual treatment I know of these problems remains Elizabeth Spelman’s *Inessential Woman* (1988). Among the many women of color who have addressed this issue, bell hooks (1981, 1984, 1990) has been particularly influential.

actual *sex* difference as well. This view may seem quite startling today since it appears to fly in the face of the contemporary doctrine of sexual dimorphism, which posits the fundamental, exhaustive, and compelling physiological distinction between the male and the female sex, each with its own thoroughgoing physiological essence. Certified by scientists and accepted without question by nearly everyone else, this doctrine is usually taken to be an all-or-nothing affair, applying universally (and hence, in a sense, democratically) across races. But we should be cautious about accepting at face value the apparent race-neutrality of such conceptions of physiological sex. Indeed, recent work by feminists and others suggests that, far from determining gender, some of the supposedly objective physiological facts of human sex may look as they do only when viewed, described, and organized through gender's lens.⁶ And so if we acknowledge how thoroughly the ideology of race continues to saturate that of gender, it would be surprising if the "scientific" category of sexual dimorphism altogether escaped gender ideology's long arm even today.

In any case, we should remember that for all of its appearance of empirical fact, the doctrine of sexual dimorphism is also a historically situated ideology; indeed, it is a fairly recent one at that, as Thomas Laqueur shows (1990). Laqueur acknowledges that gender dualism — the system of social and political distinctions between men and women — may be ancient, but, he argues, until the eighteenth century this dualism of gender was not usually thought to rest primarily on a dualism of physiological sex. Instead, only one physiological sex was recognized — the male — while the female body was regarded as an inferior version of it, the vagina simply an inverted penis, and menstruation and lactation physiological processes that would, in a body with sufficient "heat," produce not blood or milk but sperm — that precious, rarified form of the same stuff. Not until the mid-eighteenth century does femininity emerge as a full-fledged essence, complementary to masculinity and seemingly inseparable from women's special physiology (Laqueur 1990). This two-sex model, of course, has been central to gender ideology since the eighteenth century; my analysis of Ellis will show its complex contribution to racial ideology as well.

II.

To a large extent, late nineteenth-century understandings of race and sex were couched in evolutionary theory, a secular discourse that not only ad-

⁶ Kessler and McKenna 1978; Fausto-Sterling 1985; Butler 1990; Laqueur 1990; Garber 1992; Herdt 1993.

vanced scientific understanding but also justified hierarchical social relations at home and imperial power abroad. Darwin's *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* ([1871] 1981) applies the general principle of natural selection to humankind in particular and explains the workings of sexual selection, a process by which certain features, even when irrelevant for survival, are nevertheless favored by sexual partners and thus passed on to descendants. In most species, the female does the choosing; in "man," though, the tables are turned. Among human "savages," the male is stronger than the female and so holds her "in a far more abject state of bondage than does the male of any other animal"; thus, he gains the power of selection. Such power, exercised over and over, eventually creates various differences among human populations, including at least some of the differences among races. As the members of a tribe spread out and split into distinct groups, they eventually come to differ slightly, causing the "more powerful and leading savages" (371) to prefer women in whom tribal idiosyncrasies are most pronounced.

For Darwin, then, standards of beauty must vary, since each tribe will favor its own peculiarities. At the same time, however, Darwin explicitly states that women are more beautiful than men—a reasonable claim, if beauty is defined as whatever enough men turn out to prefer. Male preference, moreover, shapes not only women but also offspring of both sexes, "so that the continued preference by the men of each race of the more attractive women, according to their standard of taste, would tend to modify in the same manner all the individuals of both sexes belonging to the race" (Darwin [1871] 1981, 372). But Darwin recognized more than a merely aesthetic distinction between the races; while Victorian evolutionary theory may have closed the metaphysical gap between Englishmen and apes, it left intact that between Englishmen and the "savages" under British rule, who would, according to Darwin, eventually be exterminated and replaced by the "civilized races of man" (404). As for the relation between the sexes, the male was clearly superior. Acquired before the dawn of history, the male's "greater size, strength, courage, pugnacity, and even energy" have since been "augmented chiefly through the contests of rival males for the possession of the females," leading, along with natural selection and "the inherited effects of habit," to a "greater intellectual vigour and power of invention in man" (382–83). In contrast, woman, who even among savages displays "greater tenderness and less selfishness" than man, also has more strongly marked "powers of intuition, rapid perception, and perhaps imitation," traits that are characteristic as well of the "lower races and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization" (327). Thus, some of what may pass as a civilized woman's special essence also signifies her

failure to evolve. As for her more human traits, she owes them to her father, of course (328–29).

Insofar as he views woman as a less evolved form of man, Darwin expresses in evolutionary terms what Laqueur calls the one-sex model of humanity: the (European) male is the exemplary human of which (European) females, like the “lower races,” are inferior versions. Here Darwin departs from the alternative two-sex model, already well-entrenched by his time, which conceived of femininity not explicitly as lack but instead as a separate and complementary (if somewhat inferior) essence. Not surprisingly, these seemingly contradictory views of woman’s nature were often held simultaneously, further complicating the relationship between the discourses of sex/gender and race. In any case, Ellis demonstrates that an evolutionary cast of mind can be compatible with a two-sex as well as a one-sex human ideal, and this two-sex ideal helps constitute a particular model of racial supremacy.

Often hailed as a sexual progressive even today, Ellis was also inevitably affected by the paradoxical, ambivalent gender ideology that saw woman as “not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind” even as it urged her vigilant protection from such nonexistent feelings (William Acton, quoted in Gay 1984, 392). Of course, the sexuality so anxiously denied the angel of the house resurfaced in Victorian accounts of female mental and physical pathology; it was also projected onto the harems of the East, the “savages” of Africa, European prostitutes, and, in general, all women who worked for wages (Poovey 1988; Mabro 1991). But while Ellis certainly recognized social distinctions between women, he could not draw them on the conventional basis of sexual purity, since he acknowledged the sexual instinct in all women (Ellis 1905, 2:178–215, 505–75). Indeed, rather than an embarrassing reminder of humanity’s savage origins or its fall from grace, sexuality was for Ellis an endowment of only the most advanced races. That is, his enthusiasm for sexuality led him to claim it for European man — and, to a lesser degree, for his mate.

Of course, this view of sexuality challenged a long-standing association between savages and venery. But, Ellis notes, European opinion about the sexual profligacy of the savage was somewhat confused anyway, since firsthand European accounts of savage sexuality varied: travelers sometimes observed savages to have only weak sexual drives, sometimes prodigious ones. To a critical eye, this sort of contradiction (echoing a similar one about woman’s nature) announces, above all, the ideological instability of the categories of savagery and sexuality, especially in association. But Ellis neatly resolves this tension by denying that savages exhibit *human* sexuality in the first place. Instead, he argues that, like the beasts they supposedly

resemble, savages have only a periodic sex drive, and the enormous sexual energy they display on occasion is soon spent. No wonder, then, that travelers' reports of savage sexual exploits vary (Ellis 1905, 1:275–76).

By understanding savage sexuality as an on-again, off-again affair, Ellis can further claim that savages lack what he calls the “psychic” accompaniment to the sex drive: love, that essential sentimental glue that holds together the English hearth and for which, Ellis claims, many cultures do not even have a word (1905, 2:133–34). In this argument Ellis echoes Freud; he is also in line with Victorian ideology, which routinely contrasts English domesticity with the harems of the East — imagined as slavish dens of lesbianism, lust, and luxury — and also with the supposedly even more sordid, brutal establishments of wealthy, polygamous African chiefs. What other course remained, then, but for the paternalistic English family, inflated into the Family of Man, to care for its colonies, peopled by races as undisciplined and ignorant as children (Freud 1961, 46; McClintock 1995, 207–31; Grewal 1996, 23–55)?

But beyond its centrality for Victorian ideology generally, the ideal of domesticity allows Ellis to distinguish between higher and lower orders of womanhood, so that, while the proper Englishwoman may be a sexual being, her sexuality is always infused with a special maternal love directed not only toward her children but also toward her mate (Ellis 1905, 2:572–73). As for man, he too is capable of domestic love, but only if he is inspired by a civilized woman's charms, chiefly of course her beauty, itself long a symbol of civilized domesticity. In Herbert Spencer's words, “Perhaps in no way is the moral progress of mankind more clearly shown, than by contrasting the position of women among savages with their position among the most advanced of the civilized races.” And, as it turns out, feminine beauty is an engine of this hard-won progress. Among the “lower races” the ugliness of females and the brutality of males reinforce each other, since “chronic ill-usage produces physical inferiority and physical inferiority tends to exclude those feelings which might check ill-usage” (1898, 726). Thus, through their taste in selecting mates, men both beautify their race and civilize themselves.

What, though, do men find beautiful? After a long catalog of the beauty ideals of many cultures, Ellis concludes that beauty is objective, since European travelers have “found attractive and even beautiful women, from the European perspective” even among “those races with the greatest notoriety for ugliness”:

The fact that the modern European, whose culture may be supposed to have made him especially sensitive to aesthetic beauty, is yet able

to find beauty among even the women of savage races serves to illustrate the statement already made that, whatever modifying influences may have to be admitted, beauty is to a large extent an objective matter. The existence of this objective element in beauty is confirmed by the fact that it is sometimes found that the men of the lower races admire European women more than women of their own race. There is reason to believe that it is among the more intelligent men of lower race—that is to say those whose aesthetic feelings are more developed—that the admiration for white women is more likely to be found. (1905, 1:152–53)

But this passage presents a productive puzzle: Ellis's aim of establishing the "objectivity" of female beauty explains why he insists on the superior aesthetic sensitivity of the European (whose good taste leads him to the beautiful) and even on the confirmation of the European verdict by "the more intelligent men of the lower races," since a judgment's universality might be considered evidence of its objectivity. But why claim as well that feminine beauty exists even among savages? What does the universal *embodiment* of feminine beauty have to do with the objectivity and universality of the standard by which this beauty is judged?

This question draws us squarely into the dense and often confusing network of relations that underlies Ellis's discussion and continues to constitute what contemporary theorists call, all too simply, the "intersection of race and gender." First, there is the hierarchical sex/gender relation between all men and all women; second, two cross-racial hierarchies, one of men and another of women, each with a gendered European ideal at its summit; and third, the relation between men and women of *a particular race*. Not surprisingly, this third, intraracial relation has been largely ignored by mainstream feminists, who focus primarily on the first. Even feminist discussions of race, insofar as they analyze the troubled relations among women of different races, focus primarily on the second sort of relation. But the third, intraracial relation deserves our scrutiny since it provides the basis for judgments about the degree of sex/gender dimorphism supposedly exhibited by particular races. Indeed, examining how sex/gender difference is understood intraracially rather than merely interracially shows how classifications of race and sex complement, even constitute, one another rather than simply cut across one another or even compete. In short, the sex/gender difference that is supposedly displayed fully only by the European heterosexual couple serves as an ideal against which to measure all races.

As feminists at least since Mary Wollstonecraft have understood, the male project of passing judgment on the beauty of women clearly exemplifies the first, interracial relation, that between all men and all women:

Whatever their particular standard of taste, men are the judges of beauty; however compelling their charms, women are the judged. This relation, of course, is an instance of a more general one between man as subject and woman as object, the male subject exercising his will and higher mental functions over a female object. But, among this interracial brotherhood of connoisseurs, some men are finer, more objective judges than others, using a standard toward which all men dimly strive—as Ellis’s reference to the taste of the “more intelligent” men of “lower race” supposedly demonstrates. Thus, the first, general relation between men and women leads to the second, intragender one between men of different races. Moreover, from this perspective non-European male taste may be undeveloped partly because these men have little experience of real feminine beauty; just as European men exercise a standard of taste that men of “lower race” approach only rarely, so European women display a beauty surpassing that of Other women. Thus, the interracial male hierarchy of taste is complemented by a corresponding female hierarchy of beauty. Together, these hierarchies allow Ellis to distinguish in gendered terms between higher and lower races, the lower ones striving for gendered ideals that the higher ones have already realized.

Not surprisingly, this scheme involves its own tensions, material as well as logical. Indeed, Ellis’s discussion might usefully be understood in the context of an issue that exercised colonial policy makers no less than it did male European fantasy: the relationship between male colonists and the women of colonized territories. Passing judgment on a pageant of exotic women not only consolidated a female comparison class over which European man had dominion, it also provided recreation for European colonists. As one historian puts it, “Running the Victorian empire would probably have been intolerable without resort to sexual relaxation” (Hyam 1990, 89). But attitudes toward such relaxation were not stable. In the eighteenth century, European conceptions of race, still informed by Enlightenment humanist ideals, allowed widespread concubinage—a practice officially encouraged in India, for example, as a way both to increase English officers’ knowledge of native affairs and to populate the Indian army. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the escalation of imperialism and increased colonial resistance to it were accompanied by a hardening of domestic racial attitudes (Hyam 1990, 116–17). British disapproval of such liaisons grew,⁷ while Victorian intellectuals became obsessed with the question of whether the “lower races” could even be counted among the same

⁷ In 1909 the British colonial service officially warned against concubinage; the French, however, continued to encourage concubinage as the “easiest, pleasantest, and surest means of gallicising West Africa” (Hyam 1990, 157).

species as their colonizers—the answer to which, notably, was thought to rest on the fertility and vigor of the offspring of interracial unions. In light of the flourishing of racially hybrid populations across the empire, the widespread if wishful assertion that interracial unions could produce only infertile or degenerate offspring suggests that anxiety about miscegenation (a term coined, indeed, in 1864) may have helped fuel the debate about which races qualify as human (Young 1995, 90–117).

Such anxiety also contributed to tensions in European representations of colonized women. Then, as now, perhaps, physical beauty signified both a woman's sexual desirability and her racial superiority (and hence fitness for reproduction and suitability as a mate). Racially Other women, however, were often seen as sexuality incarnate as well as (indeed, *because*) racially inferior and summarily pronounced ugly, an ugliness as much moral as physiological. More often (and sometimes in the same breath) their beauty was admitted but dismissed as “physical only,” not “affecting the soul in the least” and having “nothing to do with love” (Mabro 1991, 77, 152, 230). Routinely represented as unkempt and lazy, neither could they measure up to the strenuous ideal of Victorian domesticity, let alone of maternity. For example, although the harem with which Eastern women were associated may have been more nursery than brothel, Orientalist harem paintings from the period rarely even show these women with their children, let alone as the highly sentimentalized paragons of maternity familiar from Victorian domestic portraiture (Mabro 1991, 6; Young 1995, 97–98; Lewis 1996, 85–126). Indeed, while Victorians routinely attributed excessive fertility to “primitive” races, perhaps any hint of Other women's reproductive capacity was bound to raise the specter of miscegenation in the sexualized harem of Western imagination.⁸ So, while the sexual availability (and desirability) of colonized women may have served to consolidate a universal, interracial category of women, European womanhood's monopoly on domesticity and maternity not only reinforced social distinctions between women but also relieved European anxieties about “miscegenation,” distinctions and anxieties that I suspect may still trouble contemporary attitudes about motherhood, family, beauty, and sexual agency.

Ellis, for his part, reasserts the primacy of race through the quasi-scientific narrative about reproduction that shapes his discussion of female beauty. To Ellis, the universality of female beauty may have served a European appetite for sexual novelty (he claims that “in states of high civilization” an “exotic element” enters into the ideal of beauty, causing some

⁸ See, e.g., De Quincey (1821) 1985 and Spencer 1852, as discussed in Young 1995, 98.

men to admire unfamiliar types), but, like Darwin, he *explains* women's appearance, in part, by the tastes of the men with whom they mate (1905, 1:211). Thus, from his evolutionary perspective, the (male) judgments of female beauty that matter most will be those internal to particular races, since judgments shape races.

Here, then, is an answer to the question raised by Ellis's claim that feminine beauty is objective. Why, I asked, does Ellis's argument for the objectivity of beauty standards move from talking about the few male savages of taste to the few female savages of beauty? Perhaps because within a particular race, levels of male taste and of female beauty come to correspond through the mechanism of sexual selection: as men's taste "improves," they seek more "beautiful" women as mates; correspondingly, the more beautiful women there are to appreciate, the better men's taste becomes. But emphasizing this material connection of female beauty to male taste within a breeding group construes the relation between the sexes *intra*racially, thus asserting a comforting kind of racial reproductive closure even in the face of the global character of male colonists' sexual conquests.

Of course, beyond allaying fears of miscegenation, such a racially specific interpretation of the general relation of male-as-beauty-judge to female-as-beauty-contestant allows each race to be ranked by how nearly its taste-beauty quotient, so to speak, approximates the European ideal. But understanding sexual difference *intra*racially serves a further end. In more civilized races, Ellis claims, where male taste and female beauty are fully realized, women have developed wide hips and large breasts—the better not only to inspire male chivalry (as Spencer might have said) but also, as we shall see presently, to reconcile sexual difference with racial supremacy.

III.

Sex and beauty may be intertwined, Ellis tells us, but a civilized appreciation of beauty requires acknowledging—as all but savages in a "low level of culture" are able to do—that the genitals are simply ugly (1905, 1:161). Because of their function, sexual organs must retain their "primitive" character; unable to "be greatly modified by sexual or natural selection," they can hardly "be regarded as beautiful" (1:169). That which is beautiful, again, is that which evolves through sexual selection. (Notice too the artistry attributed to generations and generations of European males, who, through sexual selection after sexual selection, actually *create* the masterpiece of European female beauty.) In explaining the ugliness of genital form as a consequence of its subservience to function, Ellis seems to echo the Kantian aesthetic ideology that measures the beautiful by its distance

from the useful or (re)productive. Nonetheless, feminine beauty, far from autonomous, is inextricably linked for Ellis with maternity: women's beauty turns out to depend not on primary (i.e., genital) sexual characteristics but secondary ones — wide pelvis and full breasts, designed for bearing and nursing. Here Ellis may seem to be moving toward a universal, cross-racial sexual dimorphism, since hips and breasts are, one might assume, universal female endowments. But, according to Ellis, while the *ideal* of full breasts and pelvis may be recognized nearly universally, it is best *realized* by white European women — perhaps because sexual selection, at least as far as the broad pelvis is concerned, coincides with natural selection (1:156). “Broad hips, which involve a large pelvis, are necessarily,” he claims, “a characteristic of the highest human races, because the races with the largest heads must be endowed also with the largest pelvis to enable their large heads to enter the world” (1:165). Thus, the broad European pelvis, beautiful and desirable on its own, gains moral dignity through its association with the European (male?) infant's large brain.

This full-breasted, wide-pelvised standard of beauty is an objective one, Ellis claims, accepted even among races in which women lack these features. Indeed, African women, whose pelvis is “the least developed, the narrowest, and the flattest,” cultivate steatopygia, “a simulation of the large pelvis of the higher races” consisting of “an enormously exaggerated development of the subcutaneous layer of fat which normally covers the buttocks and upper parts of the thighs in woman” (1905, 1:165). True beauty, the female physiological expression of racial superiority, can be only mimicked by less highly evolved races, much as a deceitful prostitute (herself associated with steatopygia in the nineteenth century) might use cosmetics or clothing to disguise the inevitable signs of her depravity (Gilman 1985, 76–108).

But a universal standard of beauty is not the whole story for Ellis. There is also a tendency for “the specific characters of the race or nation” to cause divergence in ideals of beauty, which is “often held to consist in the extreme development of these racial or national anthropological features” (1905, 1:210): “It frequently happens that this admiration for racial characteristics leads to the idealization of features which are far removed from aesthetic beauty. The firm and rounded breast is certainly a feature of beauty, but among many of the black peoples of Africa the breasts fall at a very early period, and here we sometimes find that the hanging breast is admired as beautiful” (1:176). So, within any race, universal, objective standards of beauty coexist with racially particular ones, and while the more advanced men of lower races may be drawn to the European type, they will be in the minority.

Here, then, is a particular formulation of a tension that continues to be familiar to liberal humanism: that between human universal and human particular, the universal connoting the highest human values, embodied, as always, in the European body and mind, and the particular connoting those partial and parochial values that shape the bodies and minds of the rest of the species. This opposition between universal and particular, between essence and accident—as usual, a problem only for the lower races—is resolved by the civilized white European, in whose mind and body the universal ideal and the existing particular converge.⁹

But this resolution raises new problems. While the match between the European woman's wide pelvis and the European man's appreciation of it establishes a kind of racial reproductive closure based on both sexual and natural selection, Ellis has some difficulty reconciling this feminine ideal with a more obvious indication of "superior" race: skin and hair color. On the one hand, the two seem to go together. The fair woman, claims Ellis, is universally and rightly agreed to be the most beautiful. Not only does her "brilliantly conspicuous" golden hair complement the "soft outlines of woman," but she is also most likely, on his account, to exhibit that most beautiful and desirable combination of well-developed breasts and wide pelvis (presumably because of her racial superiority) (1905, 1:177).

But blondness also has another, differently gendered meaning for Ellis, who complicates his discussion by drawing on a human aesthetic ideal, articulated frequently since the eighteenth century, that associates human beauty with an intellectual and moral perfection that is decidedly *masculine*. Indeed, in the midst of a discussion devoted almost entirely to feminine beauty, he asserts that the male body is actually aesthetically superior to the female, apart from the unfortunate if decisive fact that the protuberance of the male genital organ, especially when erect, ruins the male form—a failing avoided by Woman, whose "sexual region is almost imperceptible in any ordinary and normal position of the nude body" (1905, 1:162). So the virtues of beauty, masculinity, and racial superiority are combined, indeed conflated, in the European male, and the one-sex model of humanity turns out to have a race as well (Gobineau 1915; Stepan 1993; Young 1995, 99–117).¹⁰ But of course there is a problem, since races comprise both men and women. What about the women of (blond) superior races? Ellis does

⁹ Indeed, feminists who are insufficiently attentive to race and other sorts of social differences between women tend to replicate this tension: the white, middle-class, Western, heterosexual, Christian woman is taken to be the paradigm of what a woman should be; thus, she is also the only sort of woman likely to come even close to embodying this paradigm.

¹⁰ For discussions of the role of aesthetics in racialist theories, see Schiebinger 1993, 126–34; Young 1995, 96–97.

not shrink from the dilemma: “Other things being equal, the most blonde is most beautiful; but it so happens that among the races of Great Britain the other things are very frequently not equal. . . . In most parts of Europe the coarse and unbeautiful plebeian type tends to be very dark; in England it tends to be very fair. . . . The English beautiful woman, though she may still be fair, is by no means very fair, and from the English standpoint she may even sometimes appear somewhat dark” (1:183). Apparently, one can have too much of a good thing. But what, exactly, is wrong with the too-blond woman? “Fair people, possibly as a matter of race more than from absence of pigment, are more energetic than dark people. They possess a sanguine vigor and impetuosity which . . . especially in the competition of practical life, tend to give them some superiority over their darker brethren. . . . Fair men are most likely to obtain wives[;] . . . created peers are fairer than either hereditary peers or even most groups of intellectual persons; they have possessed in higher measure the qualities that insure success” (1:203). Fair women, by virtue of their race, will possess these “blond” moral qualities, too. But there’s a problem: if the fair woman has too much of whatever it is that makes the fair man superior, she threatens to become his equal. Or, as Ellis puts it, “Energy in a woman in courtship is less congenial to her sexual attitude than to a man’s, and is not attractive to men; thus it is not surprising, even apart from the probably greater beauty of dark women, that the preponderance of fairness among wives as compared to women generally . . . is very slight. It may possibly be accounted for altogether by homogamy—the tendency of like to marry like—in the fair husbands” (1:204).

This principle of homogamy—reflected by the “widely felt” sense that “one would not like to marry a person of foreign, even though closely allied, race”—inclines fair men to look for the racial characteristic of blondness, but insofar as blondness is accompanied by vigor and assertiveness—*male* characteristics—it must be unattractive in a woman (1:198). After all, Ellis insists, heterosexuality requires that opposites attract, and so “it would be hopeless to seek for any homogamy between the manly man and the virile woman, between the feminine woman and the effeminate man. It is not impossible that this tendency to seek disparity in sexual characters may exert some disturbing influences on the tendency to seek parity in anthropological racial characters, for the sexual difference to some extent makes itself felt in racial characters” (1:208). This collapse of sex into race threatens not only racial purity but blond heterosexuality itself: if like attracts like, fair men may be tempted by each other, but if unlike attracts, European men may desire the men of feminized races as well as (or instead of) the women (Young 1995, 109). As for fair women, their fathers and

brothers may have evolved to enjoy the “sanguine vigor and impetuosity” so important for worldly success — which is only as it should be. But something is very amiss if women possess these racial traits as well. Indeed, Ellis implies, the vigorous, impetuous woman risks utter failure, unable even to attract a mate with whom to reproduce.

But all is not lost. Ellis contains this potential gender disorder by racializing it further: the too-blond woman, remember, is found among the “coarse and plebian type” of the “races of Great Britain.” Ultimately Ellis rejects the simple masculinist conception of racial advancement that takes the evolution of manliness among men as its sole criterion. Men must be masculine, to be sure, but women, for their part, must be feminine — as indeed they are among the “more refined” races of Britain, where the sexual dimorphism of the fair saves the day. Unlike other marks of femininity — lack of intellectual power and drive, for example — wide pelvises and full breasts are not found in men of the lower races and so cannot be associated simply with racial inferiority. Nor, for that matter, are they found in women of lower races. Instead, they signify a racial superiority of a distinctly feminine sort, one that complements (without, of course, quite equaling) masculine racial superiority. Thus Ellis shows how the move from a one-sex to a two-sex model of humanity is implicated not only in an essentialist notion of woman’s physiological difference but also in a theory of racial supremacy that is based on sex/gender dimorphism.

IV.

This understanding of racialized sexual dimorphism continued to serve racist ideology well into the twentieth century. In 1920, for example, the Viennese anthropologist Robert Stigler remarked on the vagueness of sexual characteristics in Jews, among whom “the women are often found to have a relatively narrow pelvis and relatively broad shoulders and the men to have broad hips and narrow shoulders.” Moving without hesitation from the physiological to the social, he notes further that in their advocacy of the “social and professional equality of man and woman,” Jews have tried to eliminate the “role secondary sexual characteristics instinctively play among normal people” (quoted in Gilman 1993, 162–63).¹¹ As the century progressed, however, the racialization of sex/gender dimorphism be-

¹¹ In 1983, feminist historian Gisela Bock noted that, according to Nazi ideologues, “the difference and polarity between the sexes (reason/emotion, activity/passivity, paid work/housework) is fully developed only in the ‘superior,’ the ‘nordic,’ races; among ‘inferior races,’ including those of low ‘hereditary value,’ the sexes are less differentiated — and thus heavy and cheap labor is good for both” (417).

came more subtle. At midcentury anthropologists were still writing about the pelvis, which, no longer the explicit focus of an overtly racist classificatory scheme, now appeared to signify sex/gender difference alone. By 1957 the physical anthropologist Lucile Hoyme could marvel that anthropology had taken so long to recognize the pelvis as a universal indicator of sexual difference and speculate that this delay was the consequence of an earlier era's misguided determination to use the pelvis primarily to differentiate among races. But the role of the pelvis in the story of race was not over yet. Having just hailed anthropologists' realization of the pelvis's relevance to sex rather than race, Hoyme suggests, almost in passing, a possible direction for future study: collecting data measuring the comparative disparity in pelvic measurements between men and women *within particular races*. But this, of course, is to smuggle race in through the back door, as the quest for the racial pelvis becomes masked by the subtler, more complicated, and apparently innocent quest for the pelvic measure of sexual dimorphism within particular races.

Of course, such subtlety may be just what is required today, when ignoring race, as Toni Morrison (1990, 10) has commented, is often understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. But this reticence shows only that race is embarrassing these days in ways that sex/gender is not. In this ideological climate, what better harbor for a covert racism than the apparently innocent notion of sexual dimorphism, with its imprimatur of scientific neutrality and its unavowed racist lineage? Gender meanings, certainly, continue to be saturated with race, and while many feminists have done their best to distinguish sharply between sex and gender in a way that discourages reading racialized gender meanings back onto the sexed body, dominant ideology is another matter: far from liberating gender *from* sex, the distinction between sex and gender is more likely to naturalize and justify gender *through* sex—hence the popularity of sociobiology.

But an ideology of gender dimorphism need not be explicitly grounded in physiological sex to be implicated in racist ideology. Pelvis width aside, Ellis's racialized ideal of sex/gender difference, with its contrast of feminine passivity and male competitive spirit, is no doubt rooted not in biology but in the gender relations that were consolidated with the modern bourgeois family and quickly became a measure of the health and ascendancy of particular social groups. In eighteenth-century Europe, for example, the rising bourgeoisie criticized the effeminacy of aristocratic men and the lack of feminine virtue among aristocratic women (Landes 1988; Gutwirth 1992), and in nineteenth-century India, nationalists claimed for the middle class a domesticity superior to that of the English, whose women often indulged a decidedly masculine appetite for travel and adventure (Grewal

1996, 57). Correspondingly, denying gender difference to African slaves in the United States so dehumanized them in the white imagination that, more than a century later, U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1967) could attribute African Americans' continued social disadvantage—surely a multifaceted, systemic phenomenon—to a single cause: the “tangled pathology” of the black family, characterized by an absent husband and an “emasculating” female breadwinner. Moynihan not only invoked the familiar male-supremacist standard of gender normalcy and social health but also racialized the failure to meet it—even though the patterns he criticizes turn out to characterize poor families of all races.¹² Indeed, while a certain sort of white liberalism combines the belief that all races are capable of meeting the gender-dimorphic ideal with a commitment to social policies furthering this end, the history of U.S. welfare policy nevertheless shows much white ambivalence on this score. After all, realizing this privileged ideal of gender difference universally would inevitably diminish its social prestige, as well as threaten the supply of cheap labor.¹³ Hence, perhaps, the peculiar conservative combination of a general sentimental reverence for maternal domesticity with support for forcing welfare mothers, usually imagined as black, into the workforce even as their children are herded into orphanages or foster care (Morganthau 1994; Van Biema 1994).

But more is at stake here than the racism of dominant ideology. We must also look again at feminist thought. In light of the deeply entrenched and persistent racialization of sex/gender dimorphism, what are we to make of feminism's sometimes uncritical acceptance of an abstract notion of sex/gender difference as its basic category of analysis, let alone as a cause for celebration? Of course, feminist approaches that emphasize women's supposedly universal differences from men (female nurturance or maternity, e.g.) or aspects of oppression (enforced passivity, sexual repression, or compulsory childbearing) have already attracted their share of criticism. It is no surprise that the ideal of motherhood extolled by Sara Ruddick (1989), the feminine ethical sensibility celebrated by Carol Gilligan (1982), and the educated housewife's frustration lamented by Betty Friedan (1963) have resonated more with white middle-class women than with, say, their nannies or maids. Indeed, as Elizabeth Spelman (1988, 13) has pointed out, the phrase “as a woman” often serves as the Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism, smuggling white middle-class bias into even

¹² On the degendering of U.S. slaves, see Davis 1981; Carby 1987; Spillers 1989. On the Moynihan report and controversy, see Rainwater and Yancey 1967.

¹³ Consider, e.g., the 1971 response of a Georgia representative to Nixon's Family Assistance Program: “There's not going to be anybody left to roll these wheelbarrows and press these shirts” (quoted in Quadagno 1994, 130).

well-meaning feminist discourse. In part to meet such criticism, some feminists have invoked a more abstract notion of sexual difference that is purged of ethnocentric particularity. While Drucilla Cornell, for example, insists that “the struggle against the enforcement of the gender divide . . . cannot be separated from the affirmation of feminine sexual difference,” she cautions that such difference “is not to be identified with the properties ‘correlated’ within current conventions with actual women” or taken “as an actual reality that is expressed in the lives of all women as they survive under the patriarchal order” (1991, 9, 66). But even if Cornell succeeds (and I think she does not) in formulating an intelligible notion of sexual difference abstract enough to escape the specific ethnocentrism of more substantive notions of femininity, we should not be surprised if the category of sexual difference, even when understood so abstractly, remains stubbornly entwined with that of race. Indeed, Cornell’s account, for all the care she takes, suggests this very association. For example, to the important objection that emphasizing feminine difference is a dangerous game, liable to reinforce dominant gender meanings and relations, she revealingly replies that if women seek power and parity with men, “we will be left in the masculine arena in which the old games of domination are played out,” for “without the affirmation of the feminine, we can only identify with ‘Daddy’” (1991, 11)—a disconcerting feminist echo of Ellis’s worry about the blond woman’s vigor. Cornell even, if unwittingly, targets the same group that Ellis does: after all, who but the most privileged of women need fear losing their souls by becoming as rich and powerful as “Daddy”?

Of course, when women insist on equality with men, they may well have in mind not just any men but wealthy, powerful ones in particular, and feminists are right to worry that the cost of such privilege, whatever the gender of its bearer, may be the oppression of others. The women who are best placed to achieve such “equality,” moreover, are of the same social group as the men they measure themselves against. In such a context, at least, the desire to be equal to (privileged white) men and the desire to maintain sex/gender difference—desires that correspond to seemingly opposed camps of a major disagreement in contemporary feminism—begin to look like complements, each representing one side of a single race (and class) coin. Just as earlier feminist attempts to arrive at an essence or condition common to all women often end by reflecting the social situation of a privileged group, so too the terms of the “equality versus difference” debate in feminism may express a less-than-universal dilemma born of privilege. Indeed, from Rousseau on, male champions of sexual difference often deny (at least part of the time) that femininity is inferior to masculinity, and although this denial may be legitimately understood as a masculinist

ploy to hoodwink women into accepting second-class citizenship, it also seems to affirm the racial superiority implicit in the idea(1) of femininity. After all, Ellis was neither the first nor the last to connect femininity to beauty, domesticity, and maternal capacity—traits, as we have seen, that not only constitute feminine difference but also signify, if more subtly, the superior race with which such difference is associated. Indeed, one cannot help but wonder whether this association with racial privilege contributes to the appeal of feminine “difference,” especially as its traditional limitations—confinement to the domestic sphere and the lack of autonomy that attends it, for example—give way to social equality. Perhaps the figure of the successful white female professional who enthusiastically cultivates feminine difference—for example, by pursuit of a “perfect” feminine face or body—might be understood as trying to combine the differently gendered and hence traditionally incompatible privileges of race.

Indeed, a whiff of this desire to have it both ways may even hang about Cornell’s project. She claims that feminism should be based on a notion of feminine difference, but she also insists that this notion of difference be understood not empirically or historically but philosophically—within, that is, the privileged terms of “theory.” As Cornell puts it, “one aspect of this attempt to associate sexual difference with the deconstruction of identity logic more generally is that the question of sexual difference achieves philosophical status” (1991, 118). But why should feminists seek “philosophical status” for sexual difference? One reason, I suspect, involves the academic prestige and authority accorded to philosophy, a prestige and authority that may well be related to the singular hostility that philosophy has traditionally shown toward both women and feminism. Indeed, in the world of the academy, at least, philosophy seems to be the very paradigm of “Daddy’s game”—reason enough to make some feminists suspicious (Christian 1990; Nye 1995).

But there is a further problem with sexual difference, at least as construed by some contemporary theorists. Feminists may continue to argue over whether the master’s tools can dismantle the master’s house, but some of these tools seem ill suited even to take its measure. Following a variety of post-Hegelian critical perspectives—particularly structuralism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction—much academic feminist theory accepts without question a metaphysics and methodology based on binary opposition. At first glance, this emphasis may seem fortuitous, meshing well with what appears to be the sharply and irreducibly binary character of sex/gender ideology. Indeed, some regard this binary character as so deeply rooted—in the psyche, in culture, in language—that one can hope at most for its destabilization from within, whether by a utopian reaffirmation of feminine difference, as Cornell suggests, or by the parodic, reiterative per-

performances of gender that some other feminists celebrate (Butler 1990; Garber 1992). Still other feminists advocate thinking “beyond sexual dimorphism” by calling attention to the secrecy surrounding newborns of indeterminate sex, who must be altered quickly and decisively lest nature itself seem to have produced counterexamples to the very sex-dimorphic order our culture insists is natural (Kessler and McKenna 1978). Or they point to non-Western conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality that neither necessarily presume nor enforce the existence of a dimorphic, exhaustive system of sex/gender classification (Herdt 1993).¹⁴

But all of these approaches risk oversimplifying sex/gender ideology by overstating and misconstruing its binary character, which, in fact, seems all the sharper the more its racial dimension is obscured. For although dualism is certainly a central and abiding organizing category in the West, we should not assume that it is the only one. Perhaps just as ubiquitous and persistent is another, stretching from Plato to Darwin and beyond, that understands the world as a great chain of being, brimming over with every manner of thing, continuous, without gaps, and above all hierarchical (Lovejoy 1936). This gradualist metaphysics of plenitude has helped shape modern Western ideologies of social hierarchy, most obviously in the case of race (Jordan 1968, 217–28; Young 1995, 6–19) but also, if more subtly, in the case of sex and gender. It underlies what I have called (following Laqueur) the pre-Enlightenment one-sex understanding of sex/gender according to which (European) women, like the “lower races,” were considered to be (European) man’s inferiors rather than his complement. Indeed, one might even say that until the notion of feminine complementarity became ascendent, (European) women and men of “lower race” were regarded as similarly inferior human specimens. The introduction of a more robustly dualist gender ideology, as we have seen, complicated and, to some extent, displaced this ideology of feminine inferiority by introducing the idea(l) of feminine complementarity—an ideal that is essential to the structural connection between sex/gender difference and racial hierarchy that I have traced. But, paradoxically, this structural connection itself depends, in a sense, on a new differentiation between the discourses of race and sex/gender. Whereas, previously, women and non-Western men

¹⁴ In a sense, such accounts recuperate and rework the very racialization of sex/gender dimorphism that I have been considering: Whereas the racist ideology to which Ellis subscribes takes the allegedly insufficient sex/gender dimorphism of non-Europeans as a defect, this so-called failure, reconceived as a cultural rather than a physiological difference, may be reinterpreted positively as a less oppressive alternative to the Western ideology of sex/gender dimorphism, which is then revealed to be an unfortunate cultural construction (Herdt 1993, esp. 21–81).

were thought to share a similar inferiority to European man, now women of privileged race, thanks to their “difference,” have become man’s complement. So while particular races continued to fall somewhere along the hierarchy defined by the great chain of being, femininity in the abstract became more difficult to place, in part because it was no longer understood simply as inferiority and in part because it was not understood, really, to be a property of *all* females after all (Schiebinger 1993, 143–83). Yet, it would be a mistake to understand the advent of feminine complementarity as simply an instance of dualism trumping gradualism as sex/gender ideology’s central organizing category. The gradualism that had informed the pre-eighteenth-century one-sex notion of female inferiority still had a role to play, reemerging in the graduated scale of racialized sex/gender difference along which various races could be situated. Racial ideology, then, incorporated the new conception of femininity as one half of a racialized dimorphic sex/gender ideal, even as sex/gender dimorphism took on its full conceptual and ideological meaning only as an ideal that most races fail to meet. Thus, “thinking beyond sexual dimorphism” is far from a nearly impossible, utopian feat, requiring studies of non-Western cultures or physical anomalies even to give us the idea; on the contrary, to grasp a *racialized* binary of sex/gender is already, in a sense, to have thought beyond what now appears to be sex/gender ideology’s rather superficial binarism.

Why has this been so difficult for feminists to see? Surely the “whiteness” of mainstream feminism has not helped. Nor has the academic theoretical penchant for looking at the social world through the lens of binary opposition. But I suspect as well that feminists share with dominant culture an unfortunate resistance to regarding sex/gender categories historically, a resistance reinforced in the academy by the lofty status it reserves for the most ahistorical and a priori styles of analysis.¹⁵ Cornell, for example, repeatedly insists on the “disjunction between social reality and psychic life” and consistently favors heavily psychoanalytic approaches that emphasize the latter (1991, 63). But whatever their virtues, such approaches run the risk of ignoring the broad clues afforded by our recent and frankly racist past, when Ellis and others could write about sex and race so unself-consciously and revealingly. Of course, Cornell might counter that the

¹⁵ Very few feminists explicitly discuss the connection between sex/gender dimorphism and racial supremacist ideology, and those who do so tend to be historians writing about fairly specific periods: see, e.g., Gisela Bock 1983 on Nazi Germany and Cynthia Eagle Russett 1989 on Victorian England. Gail Bederman, whose excellent study (1995) of American cultural history between 1880 and 1917 came to my attention only after I had completed this article, demonstrates particularly well the enormous importance of this connection.

study of gender must lead back to the psyche, since “we cannot escape the hold of the feminine on the unconscious” (182), but perhaps Émile Durkheim was closer to the truth when he remarked that the true unconscious is history.¹⁶

Philosophy Department
Willamette University

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¹⁶ From Durkheim’s *The Evolution of Educational Thought*, quoted in Bourdieu 1988, xi.

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