

The Encounter Between Feminism and Liberalism: An Itinerary of “Woman”

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“Woman, you see, it’s such a subject that, however much you study her, there’ll always be something new.”

-Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

Introduction: Feminism and the Category of “Woman”

It is not enough to inquire into how women might become more fully represented in language and politics. Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category “women,” the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought. – Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

...To the extent that rights consolidate the fiction of the sovereign individual generally, and of naturalized identities of particular individuals, they consolidate that which the historically subordinated both need access to—sovereign individuality, which we cannot not want—and need to challenge insofar as the terms of that individuality are predicated upon a humanism that routinely conceals its gendered, racial, and sexual norms. –Wendy Brown, “Suffering Rights as Paradoxes”

To begin by saying that the category of “woman” is both feminism’s condition of possibility as well the source of its perpetual undoing is to repeat what has become a foundational tension within feminist scholarship and the discipline of women’s studies. As a wide body of work now attests, any claim to the specificity that constitutes “woman” will always be an exclusionary undertaking that inevitably produces regulatory norms of authenticity in its wake. At the same time, however, the contribution of feminism has precisely been that of exposing and contesting the ways in which “woman” has, in brief, been variously excluded from the domain of the human. To that end, the coherency of “woman” is the enabling condition of such a project, even as the boundaries of the category are continually redrawn as a result of the challenges brought forth by its necessary omissions. Women of color feminisms, Third World feminisms, and postcolonial feminisms, in particular, have charted the ways in which the staging of “woman” as an abstract category is premised upon the assumption of a white subject. Many divergences and disagreements ensue from this initial contention, circulating around the question of whether “woman” can be amended and expanded to include its previous erasures. One response along these lines has been to call for the pluralizing of the subject, signified by the shift from singular “Woman” to plural “women.” This shift entails the recognition of difference, beginning with the triad of “race-class-sexuality” but then giving way to an ever-proliferating list. The rubric of intersectionality, a name that has come to designate gender’s necessary imbrication with other categories of difference, has emerged as the dominant response to the conflation of “woman” with whiteness, and

is also heralded as feminism's principle contribution to the academy. Although the interventions into the thinking of gender brought about by intersectionality cannot be overstated, and in many ways have yet to be fully contended with, the approach to difference that it posits remains guided by the goal of complete and totalizing representation. In that respect, the consolidation of intersectionality as the primary solution to the privileging of gender has also closed off other considerations. Put most concisely, this study seeks to examine anew the ethnocentrism of the category "woman," a contention that has guided multiple and contradictory efforts to accommodate feminism to difference, including the recent disciplinary shift from global to transnational feminism.

The concerns that motivate the project of this dissertation, like any act of knowledge production, necessarily emerge from the view accorded by its perspective, which in addition to carrying its own blind spots is also enabled by taking certain things for granted. Over the course of writing about the racism that is constitutively bound up with the staging of "woman" as an abstract subject, I have come to recognize that my own investment in this critique is possible only because of the privilege accorded from the ability to take feminism for granted. More specifically, the fact that my entire academic training has taken place within the discipline of Women's Studies has offered a particular shelter from the perpetual need to defend the significance and validity of feminist scholarship.¹ In that sense, the opening to this critique is intimately tied to the luxury of a milieu in which the centrality of feminism is not in question. At the same time, such an opening is accompanied by (or perhaps is also dependent on) an overlooking of the ways in which the critique could travel as a denunciation of feminism. More specifically, the focus on feminist texts that I take here risks losing sight of the violence that is the enabling condition of all knowledge production, thereby pitting feminism as a failed project, or one that can only be corrected or amended from without. Before moving forward, then, it is worth noting at the outset that my attention to feminism is not a function of the singularity or severity of its offences. Rather, its body

¹ This sheltering that I describe is, at the same time, constantly in tension with the tenuous position of the discipline within the current restructuring of the US academy. A graduate education in Gender Studies also makes one acutely aware of the disparities of funding and resources that take place under the umbrella of liberal arts, and the incessant threat to consolidate ethnic and gender studies into some version of a "social justice" discipline.

of thought is what I have come to know, and what has subsequently guided me through fields of inquiry concerned with the grounding of concepts and the colonial episteme. These tensions will be struggled over in more detail, but for now, it is to note that such a critical engagement is relevant only because of the significance of the texts I consider, and their continued role in shaping the terrain of thought associated with feminism. Indeed, working through these texts and the questions they provoke can only be a testament to their enduring hold, a point that once said, must of course now bear itself out in the writing. And so it is with the benefit of a certain privilege and security that I embark on the following critique, which if it leads to a fundamental questioning of feminism, only comes from a commitment to taking its principles and thought seriously.

Sketching the Contours of Liberal Feminism

This dissertation takes the liberal claim for women's rights as an avenue into contending with the category of "woman" and its implications for feminist politics. The issues and concerns that conventionally fall under the heading of liberal feminism are, by far, not the only ones available to feminist thought, and furthermore, other engagements with sexual difference exist that may be entirely incommensurable with its foundational assumptions.² However, this strain of feminism is what has been institutionalized by the discipline of women's studies in the US, and as such, liberalism's conception of the subject, freedom and justice exert a huge influence on its landscape of thought. Even as the list of texts that form the feminist canon continues to be revised, expanded, or rejected altogether, it remains the case that a particular liberal core remains firmly in place, lending meaning and coherence to the concept of feminism.³ Put bluntly, the understanding of feminism in the US academy is inextricably bound up with the struggle for women's rights. In that sense, whether the treatise of Mary Wollstonecraft or the speeches of the suffragists are assigned in women's studies classrooms is largely beside the point, for these figures continue to provide feminism with an origin, however much

² Whether aspects of this critique may still apply to other feminist traditions, such as the French psychoanalytic school to take an example, would require its own separate study. I only note here the possibility that the relationship between sexual and racial difference traced in this dissertation may also extend further, albeit in other modalities and forms.

³ For a discussion of the ways in which the expansion of the canon in the mode of multiculturalism entrenches rather than unsettles its foundational ground, see: Ann Ducille (1994), Rey Chow (1998), Rachel Lee (2000), Lisa Lowe (1996).

this origin is subsequently denied or ignored by the discipline's claim to exceptionalism. In addition to the status accorded by its institutionalization, the liberal strain of feminism is also the one that circulates on the global stage, defining the terms through which women's equality and freedom is conceived at the level of the "global." As such, the language employed in the arena of international relations, in global institutions from the World Bank to the UN, is solidly that of women's rights. The central position occupied by liberal feminism, both within and without the site of the university, suggests the urgency of a continued engagement with its staging of "woman" as a subject of rights. Given that this subject serves as the organizing ground for contemporary deployments of global human rights, this study is also charged with the pressing political stakes of contending with the violence that accompanies the militarized interventions routinely undertaken in the name of women's rights.⁴

To that end, this dissertation traces how the claim to women's rights is articulated within the works of four cardinal figures of liberal feminism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Martha Nussbaum. The feminist thinkers that serve as the sites of this itinerary occupy an established position within the canon, and collectively, they each make an appeal for woman's humanity that draws upon a larger frame of civilization and progress. In tracing such a lineage, this study builds upon feminist scholarship that has meticulously excavated the gendered and sexualized roots of political thought, but considers instead how the abstract rights-bearing subject is unevenly constituted through racial and sexual difference.⁵ More specifically, my reading of these texts suggests that the category of "woman" has relied upon the twin concepts of race and civilization in order to constitute and consolidate itself, an insight that implicates *a* feminism with an irreducible ethnocentrism.⁶ Although there is a growing body of literature on the exclusions that have marked the movement for women's rights since its inception-- its intimate ties with post-abolition racism, the xenophobia that accompanied

⁴ Although the examples of wars conducted under the guise of "white men saving brown women from brown men" are many, the most recent invasion of Afghanistan (which led to an unseemly alliance between the Bush regime and the Feminist Majority Foundation) serves as a case in point.

⁵ The work of feminist political theorists is examined in more detail in the first chapter, but the argument that the abstract individual is constituted through the exclusion of woman can be found in the following: Joan Scott (1996), Carole Pateman (1988), Linda Zerilla (1994), and Wendy Brown (1992).

⁶ The task of charting which feminism, in the sense of what understanding of "woman" and sexual difference this complicity emerges from, is in many ways the very project at hand.

the passage of the immigration exclusion acts, the doctrine of Social Darwinism that informed the eugenic movement-- these alignments are conventionally narrated through the frame of historicism.⁷ The drawback to this approach is that the recognition of a racist past can all too easily serve as confirmation of feminism's enlightened present, thereby inadvertently reinforcing a progress narrative of liberal democracy. Turning to the surrounding historical context for explanation ultimately casts the allegiance to racialized logics as an aberration, rather than constitutive to the thinking of women's equality. As a result, feminism is kept pure at its origins, hermetically sealed off from the offending discourses, such that the latter can only appear as contaminating influences upon the former. By contrast, this dissertation argues that such exclusions emerge from the very struggle to insert "woman" into the conceptual framework of natural rights.

The limits to historicism articulated here provide the opening for a few notes about the chronological organization of the following chapters. The concept of the itinerary aims to challenge the narrative order and causal relationship between past and present that underpins disciplinary history.⁸ As Christina Crosby (1991) points out, women's history replicates the structure of universal history by merely substituting "woman" for "man" as the sovereign agent. The understanding of history as the realization of man is consequently left in place, along with the exclusions that provide the underlying unity to humanity. As such, woman's history remains implicitly guided by the aim of revealing the truth of woman, thereby creating a universal identity in its wake. The equation of woman with truth is also surreptitiously carried forth within critical attempts to track the changing meanings of "woman" through time. As Diane Elam (1994) comments in relation to Denise Riley's seminal study along these lines: "woman is either the truth upon which history (or her-story) focuses, or she is the untruth which it is history's job to expose. One way or another, the narrative tries to relay the truth that woman has been, is, or will be" (38). Although this study unfolds temporally, the objective is not to link particular understandings of sexual difference to their proper time period. To do this would be to assume the transparency of "context," as well as take "woman" for granted as the underlying strata onto which different meanings are then

⁷ For seminal critiques of this kind, see: Angela Davis (1983), bell hooks (1984), Louise Michele Newman (1999),

⁸ This term is taken from Spivak (1999) and chosen over "genealogy" which is still bound to telling the truth about the past.

imposed. By way of contrast, Linda Zerilli (1994) traces the relations of difference that constitute “woman” within the canonical texts of political theory, revealing the ways in which sexual difference brings stability to a whole network of terms that surround the liberal individual. With this in mind, I proceed with the conviction that identifying patterns of thought and their constitutive exclusions requires going back and tracing the lineage of concepts, an enterprise that is not simply reducible to a search for origins. On the contrary, it is an effort to contend with the racialized logics that remain operative but may be difficult to recognize in the naturalized discourses of the contemporary moment.

While each of the feminist thinkers considered in this study offers a different challenge to the problematic of man as the embodiment of the human, they all attempt to position “woman” as an equivalent because sovereign individual. Beginning with Wollstonecraft, this appeal takes the form of a means-end logic, whereby women’s rights is cast as necessary for the achievement of a greater, collective good. The end that has justified the recognition of women’s equality is the attainment of civilization, a concept whose coherence relies upon the difference of the savage. For this reason, it can be said that the feminist appeal to the rights of man is predicated upon a racialized exclusion. The figure of the savage lurks within the shadows of each of these texts, the difference that provides the condition for woman’s entry into the human, and one that liberal democracy’s scripting of women’s rights as an emancipatory project must continuously repress. If the claim to women’s equality across this lineage is made in the name of a social, it has also been joined to a concern for its “improvement” and “progress.” Inscribed within the conceptual edifice of civilization, the social that is poised to benefit from woman’s inclusion is systematically demarcated through the boundaries of race. Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s defense of women’s enfranchisement as a matter of survival for “the race” provides perhaps the most transparent case in point. Designated as both the cause of society’s demise and the solution for its uplift, “woman” serves to anchor and unify the contours of this (civilized) social. As one of the principle threads that runs from Wollstonecraft to Nussbaum, the cause of women’s debasement—patriarchy, in short—is continuously cast as the natural condition of the Other. Women’s inequality is thus rendered intelligible as the mark of racial difference, and denounced on the grounds that it signifies contamination by the other. This means that “woman” can only appear under the sign of whiteness, and by consequence, the ejection of racial others from the

boundaries of self is what enables the redemption of the white subject. As a result, woman's entry into the domain of reason, the citizen, and the subject, calls forth racialized figures of difference to mark the (new) boundaries of these concepts, a difference that is then rendered expendable through its placement firmly outside of humanity.

This itinerary ends with a consideration of Martha Nussbaum's case for women's human rights, a mobilization that inherits its conceptual framework from the strain of liberal feminism traced here, and whose significance is indicated by its far-reaching influence on the global stage. In her book dedicated to the question of women's rights, Nussbaum argues that establishing a universal platform, in the form of her trademark "central human capabilities" list, is necessary for securing women's equality given the inherent sexism of an (irrational) other. When placed within this line of texts, the figure of the other ruled by tradition emerges as a repetition of the savage, with a difference, and the redemption of the (white) subject is again achieved through the displacement of patriarchy onto the terrain of race. Hence it can be said that the contours of civilization are redrawn through the concepts of "culture" and "tradition," which now circulate as the origin and source of women's oppression. Nussbaum's argument for the universalizing of women's rights reiterates the distinction between the "fit" and the "unfit" that has always been carried within this appeal, this time by establishing an incommensurable divide between the dispensers and the benefactors of feminist politics. This split limns the boundaries of "the race" that has been the subject of uplift throughout, and for whom the commitment to equality is proper to the self. For those who occupy the enclosure of "culture," however, these principles can only come from without. As Spivak concisely puts this point in her essay "Righting Wrongs," the social Darwinism that is the enabling mark of human rights destines some to perpetually right the wrongs of others.

The culmination of liberal feminism at the site of the campaign for "women's rights as human rights" now begs a more precise account of the defining features of this sub-category of feminism that I have identified as my focus. In other words, what does this itinerary suggest about the thinking of "woman" and sexual difference that belongs to liberal feminism? And how, therefore, might its definition lead us towards another feminism, a feminism that exceeds it? In many ways, the organizing threads of liberal feminism, the elements that make up the foundational assumptions of thought that run

from Wollstonecraft to Nussbaum, could only emerge at the conclusion of this study. To begin, this line of feminism has claimed a subject “woman” and proceeded by ascribing a substance to this subject, albeit in always new and contradictory ways. The account of woman’s degradation, which invariably casts her as the source of society’s demise and a threat to civilization, arises from this imperative to fix the meaning of “woman.” Along the same lines, Judith Butler (1990) notes that feminist theory has overwhelmingly assumed a preexisting identity (given the name “women”) who pursues political representation and “initiates feminist interest and goals” (3). The meaning of woman’s freedom and sovereignty is thus rendered coherent through a constellation of concepts that surround this subject, including free will, choice, and reason. The ability to claim with certainty a proper to the self is a continuous source of struggle throughout this line of feminism, and one that continuously calls upon racial difference to mark its contours. As such, the assumption of a subject that precedes politics, a subject that awaits fully formed for the advent of proper representation, constitutes one of its formative premises. This is accompanied by the notion that there is a truth to “woman” that resides beneath the corrupting influence of a masculine-dominated society (which also carries the name of an “androcentric culture” or patriarchy), a truth that is continually deferred into a future that cannot yet be known. As a result, “woman,” as she appears in the present, is always other than her true self, a fact that both casts her as perpetually incomplete and hence undeveloped, at the same time that it carries the potential to unsettle the grounding of sexual difference that shores up the framework of natural rights.

In addition to this will to truth, liberal feminism makes an appeal for the recognition of woman as equal to man. Although this leads to multiple and conflicting articulations of sexual difference, equality is understood in terms of equivalence throughout. Significantly, the logic of equivalence is predicated upon the recognition (through measure) of sameness, which is provided by the category of the human. By that token, the staging of woman’s humanity ultimately casts difference as the sign of the inhuman. Lastly, this body of texts coheres around the positing of “woman” as an abstract category, a framing that continually seeks to lay claim to the universal. Across these efforts to conceptualize women’s rights, the abstraction of “woman” produces a metric for assigning relative levels of humanity. The subsequent chapters therefore suggest that the fundamental problem confronting liberal feminism can be put in the

following way: given that its enabling premise is advocacy for women, this feminism must inevitably demarcate the boundaries of its subject. However, the closure of “woman” as a unified category with a stable ground is always achieved through the displacement of difference from its borders. In this sense, the production and foreclosure of racial difference is also its condition of emergence. Laying out the unifying tenets of liberal feminism, an endeavor that is always inadequate and whose definition these texts also exceed, is nevertheless useful for contending with how a certain thinking of “woman” is complicit with the architecture of colonialism and racism. Exactly because feminism is not reducible to this tradition of thought, this exercise carries the possibility of opening up and pursuing other horizons of justice, equality, and freedom. But these entanglements must first be attended to so that they are not unwittingly carried forth within the pursuit of another feminism.

Democracy and its Margins

Tracing the production of difference that accompanies the consolidation of “woman” provides a different avenue into contending with the legacies of the exclusions that mark liberal democratic thought at its origins. Within the conventional narration, the excluded are deemed to be naturally aligned with one another, as differences that have been expelled from the category of the rational individual. In this sense, the incorporation of “woman” within the abstract human is placed in parallel with race, class, and sexuality, such that the struggle for women’s rights is seen as necessarily contributing to the achievement of universal equality. By contrast, my reading of these seminal texts suggests that the appeal made on behalf of women relies upon other exclusions, and the staging of other margins. To make this argument is not to attribute a moral failing to individual feminists, but rather to contend with the racialized hierarchy of humanity that accompanies the attempt to render “woman” into a subject endowed with free will and consciousness. In brief, the lineage traced in this dissertation demonstrates that the claim for women’s rights carries the prescription to eliminate difference from the boundaries of the social, and draws upon a rhetoric of perfection underwritten by concern for the survival of the self. Far from simply throwing open the boundaries of the human, the case for women’s humanity constricts and delimits the field of the abstract subject in different ways. In particular, the backdrop of civilization points to a deep-seated

complicity with the architecture of colonial thought. That the conceptual frame of progress, historical teleology, and the imperative to bring others to their full humanity has provided the justificatory logic for women's rights suggests that this lineage of feminism cannot be extricated from the racialized violence of colonialism.⁹ Whereas postcolonial feminist scholarship has attended to the ways in which colonial projects have cast themselves as feminist enterprises, this work draws out an alignment that is not about a convergence of context, but rather about the structure of the argument itself. Put otherwise, the nexus of concepts that buttresses colonial rule by ordering and assigning relative levels of humanity also provides the terms through which the premise of women's equality is rendered intelligible.

That the category of "woman" is implicated with racism and colonialism in these ways has bearings for continued efforts to contend with the exclusions that animate the feminist subject. In many ways, the framework of inclusion and exclusion through which the problem and its solution has been conceptualized is precisely what is in need of further scrutiny. At one level, feminist political theorists have challenged the notion that "woman" can simply be added to the category of the sovereign individual, demonstrating instead that "citizen man...is constructed precisely through her exclusion."¹⁰ The modality of inclusion, they have argued, leaves the assumption of man as the normative subject solidly intact. At the same time, this body of scholarship has focused entirely on how the liberal individual is constituted within the register of masculinity and femininity, assuming a "fixed, hierarchical and immobile" opposition between these terms, while displacing race onto a separate, parallel terrain.¹¹ Wendy Brown's "Suffering Rights as Paradoxes" provides a case in point. In this short piece, Brown synthesizes many of the arguments that underlie her wide corpus of work. Opening with Spivak's phrasing of liberal individualism as that which "we cannot not want," Brown goes on to articulate the

⁹Although not covered in this itinerary, the writings of John Stuart Mill provide an interesting site in which to consider this alignment. In the rare times when Mill's argument for women's rights is read alongside his justification of colonial despotism in "Considerations On Representative Government," these positions are often treated as a contradiction in his thought. In other words, his commitment to equal rights is seen to reach its limits when confronted with colonial difference, a blind spot that is taken to as a "sign of the times." However, the point to be made here is that Mill drew upon the same set of concepts to make the case for "despotic rule" (in the case of India) and women's rights—that is, "civilization," "progress," and "improvement."

¹⁰ Linda Zerilli (1994), pg 1.

¹¹ As Joan Scott argues in *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, pg 8.

central paradox concerning women's rights as the following: "the paradox, then, is that rights that entail some specification of our suffering, injury or inequality lock us into the identity defined by our subordination, while rights that eschew this specificity not only sustain the invisibility of our subordination, but potentially enhance it" (232). Brown's point is that gaining rights *as* a woman also circumscribes and solidifies this identity, such that the appeal for protection also provides the terms for further regulation. While she works to draw out the ways in which the category of "woman" is produced through heterosexuality, race on the other hand, garners an altogether separate treatment. Throughout her analysis, race is brought into the conversation through the mode of the analogy, as that which evinces the same tensions as gender and sexuality. After delineating how procuring specified rights for women paradoxically brings about further subordination, Brown describes how hate speech legislation presents a "parallel dilemma" (233). As a result, the domain of race only ever appears as an iteration of the problematic that confronts "woman," a repetition that ultimately serves to validate and enhance the paradox of women's rights. The question thus arises, who is the "we" and the "our" that is the referent for "woman" in Brown's argument? How is the "us" consolidated within the confines of a critique that seeks to point out the limits of identity-based claims? In what way might Brown's staging of "woman" also rely upon a certain displacement of race from its borders?

This dissertation seeks to intervene into the common positing of gender, sexuality and race as analogous categories, a framing that ultimately renders these differences interchangeable and keeps "woman" sutured to whiteness. Although a wide body of scholarship has drawn attention to the contradictions of invoking racism as a metaphor for women's oppression, the problem of the metonymical slippage between race and gender extends further.¹² Beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft, this itinerary tracks the ways in which sexual and racial difference are not produced in parallel, as Brown implicitly assumes, for the emergence of woman as a sovereign individual is specifically premised upon the foreclosure of racial difference. To take Wollstonecraft's treatise as an

¹² In particular, the use of slavery as a metaphor for women's subordination has a long and entrenched history, including within Marxist analysis. As an example of the critique of deploying racism as an analogy for sexism, Kobena Mercer (1996) has focused on its currency within feminist anti-pornography arguments to suggest the ways in which such an analogy consolidates white women as the normative subject and victim of misogyny.

example, woman's claim to reason is achieved by demarcating her (civilizational) difference from racialized others. As such, the inclusion of woman within the rights of man relies upon a reordering of terms that appeals to figures of race to mark the outside of the human. Within the frame of her argument, then, woman, the savage and the slave are not situated in the same relation to abstract man. This is precisely what gets lost in an additive model that lists gender, race, and sexuality as equivalent categories, an oversight that is also a failure to fully contend with the ethnocentrism of "woman." Throughout the texts considered here, race is posed as the site of pure repression, a designation that is necessary for shoring up the notion of an autonomous and free will that circulates as the sign of woman's freedom. Attending to the discontinuous lineages of racial and sexual difference suggests that "woman" is not just opposed to man, but is held together through a constellation of concepts that includes the classificatory ordering of civilization. At the same time, however, the conceptual edifice of civilization cannot do without "woman." Holding onto this tension allows for the possibility of exploiting the fragility of this relation, and thus to unsettle the chain of meaning that links woman to the human.

Conceiving the Limits of Intersectionality

The efforts to redress the normative prescriptions that accompany abstract woman have, under the rubric of intersectionality, taken the form of recognizing and including difference. What remains unaddressed, however, is that the coherence of feminism still takes "woman" as its organizing ground, with the accompanying effect that differences marked in terms of race or sexuality (for example) can only ever occupy the position of a qualifier to this category. To acknowledge difference, in other words, does not take into account how these differences are produced and understood, nor how they are taken for granted as having an underlying truth. Norma Alarcon pointed out the occlusions that accompany feminism's adherence to the modern subject in her piece titled "The Theoretical Subjects of *This Bridge Called My Back*." There she notes: "the subject (and object) of knowledge is now a woman, but the inherited view of consciousness has not been questioned at all. As a result, some Anglo-American feminist subjects of consciousness have tended to become a parody of the masculine subject of consciousness, thus revealing their ethnocentric liberal underpinnings (142)." The ethnocentrism that she alludes to in this passage is further elaborated as feminism's

adherence to gender as its central concept. She continues, “the fact that Anglo-American feminism has appropriated the generic term for itself leaves many a woman in this country having to call herself otherwise, i.e., “woman of color,” which is equally meaningless without further specification (147).” As Alarcon’s comments suggest, the move to pluralize “woman” leaves whiteness as the grounds for its unity intact, and proceeds with the model of an autonomous “self-making” and “self-determining” subject. This means that certain subjects can never lay claim to the unmarked category of “woman” because they are necessarily bound to their specified difference. If the notion of a willful and volitional subject is founded upon the fiction of self-presence that unravels under close scrutiny, it is also the case that the sovereignty of such a subject is only fully accessible to white women.

Largely regarded as the foundational theorist of intersectionality, Kimberle Crenshaw first developed the term to address the compartmentalization of race and gender in antidiscrimination law. In particular, Crenshaw worked to expose the ways in which the law takes white woman as the referent for gender and black men as the referent for race, thereby excluding the subjectivity of Black women altogether. Her analysis of legal discourse surrounding rape cases demonstrates how the subordination related to racism and patriarchy are assumed to be separate and discrete, an assumption that Crenshaw argues is replicated within feminist scholarship whose “resistances strategies... reinforce the subordination of people of color” (1252). Significantly, she opens “Demarginalizing the Intersection” by explicitly posing intersectionality as a challenge to inclusion, noting that “these problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by adding Black women within an already established analytical structure” (140). At the same time, the terms of Crenshaw’s critique consolidate “Black women,” along with “women of color,” as cohesive categories, and settles upon the notion of “cultural barriers” to articulate the intersections of marginality. In the opening chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler considers the implications of “women” standing as the subject of feminism, and the “singular notion of identity” that accompanies the assumption of its coherence and unity. Invoking the language of intersectionality, Butler works to delineate how this category carries “unmarked dimensions of class and race privilege” (19). As a result, universalist descriptions of the structure of patriarchy and feminine identity coming from within feminism, she argues, can repeat the “colonizing gesture” that it condemns by

effecting “other relations of racial, class and heterosexist subordination” (19). Here Butler pauses to mark a discomfort with this chain of meanings: “...clearly, listing the varieties of oppression, as I begin to do, assumes their discrete, sequential coexistence along a horizontal axis that does not describe their convergences within the social field” (19). This reflection indexes how the very effort to recognize the differences that inflect gender paradoxically reproduces their compartmentalization. Put otherwise, the move to conceptualize race, class and gender as mutually constitutive categories also solidifies these categories as discrete, self-enclosed and self-identical. What is overlooked in all this, according to Butler, is their “convergence within the social field.”

Butler’s brief gesturing to the limits of intersectionality is useful in getting to a set of assumptions that underlie even those arguments that evince reservations about the “listing” of identities and oppressions that this analytic invariably calls forth. In the essay discussed earlier, Wendy Brown similarly suggests the inadequacy of treating subject formation as simply intersectional. For her, this elides “...the way subjects are brought into being through subjectifying discourses, the way we are not simply oppressed but produced through these discourses, a production that does not occur in additive, intersectional or overlapping parts, but through complex and often fragmented histories in which multiple social powers are regulated through and against one another” (236). As the now familiar invoking of the “we” intimates, the end that Brown holds on to is that of a more complete and accurate representation. This becomes even more evident in her concluding remarks on the paradox of rights:

We appear not only in the law but in courts and public policy either as (undifferentiated) women, or as economically deprived, or as lesbians, or as racially stigmatized, but never as the complex, compound and internally diverse subjects that we are. This feature of rights discourse impedes the politically nuanced, socially inclusive project to which feminism has aspired in the last decade. (237)

The problem, in Brown’s summary, is that representation is not adequate to the complexity and “diversity” of subjects, and this failure consequently impedes a fully inclusionary feminism. Perhaps what is in greatest need of interrogation, however, is the assumption that race and gender are situated in the same field of representation, an assumption that underpins both Butler and Brown’s remarks. While the influence of intersectionality has brought forth a focus on the ways in which modalities of power converge and intersect, this study instead draws attention to the discontinuities between

racial and sexual difference. Indeed, it is not just that gender has been purified of race, to borrow Brown's phrasing, but that the consolidation of "woman" specifically condemns racial difference to the inhuman.

If the work of this itinerary has been to draw out feminism's entanglements with a racialized definition of humanity, the motivating impulse of such an undertaking, as I suggested from the outset, has been to contribute to the thinking of a feminism that breaks with liberalism's figurations of freedom. Rather than conceiving of "woman" as a category to be filled in by difference, such a feminism must instead struggle to keep the category permanently unstable, a contested sited of meaning that resists definitional closure.¹³ Although feminist thought is not reducible to the racism whose contours are etched out in the following pages, the recognition of "woman" as a member of humanity was perhaps made possible by it. That is at least the argument put forth in this dissertation, which if it sometimes fails to duly mark the contributions of liberal feminism, has proceeded out of concern for the remainders of colonial thought that are smuggled into the global mobilization of women's human rights. In this sense, the specific contribution to feminism made here is that of contending with the obdurate hold of civilization on its landscape of thought. This contribution poses the racialized figures that inhabit the most outlying margins of Wollstonecraft's treatise and, contrastingly, come prominently to the foreground within Gilman's eugenic platform, as intimately bound together by the same conceptual edifice, and more precisely, as the constitutive exclusions that have enabled the emergence of a universal feminist subject. Although this is not enough to carve out a feminism from the margins, it continues the long work of grappling with the sometimes violent exclusions that have brought meaning to women's equality and freedom, and the continued struggles that are waged in its name.

¹³ Judith Butler and Diane Elam make a similar case for the category of "women."

Mary Wollstonecraft's Rational Humanity: Women's Rights as Civilizational Progress

But what has humanity been conjugated against? Must it be endlessly undemocratic because 'gender-blind'—or 'race-blind'? Its democratic possibilities would depend on, for example, how thoroughly, at the time of any one articulation of the idea, the sex of the person was held to infuse and characterise her whole being, how much she was gender embodied. The question of race would demand analogous moves to establish the extent of the empire of racially suffused being over general existence of the person. A history of several categories, then, would be demanded in order to glimpse the history of one.
—Denise Riley

In her study tracing the category of “women” in history, Denise Riley diligently challenges the notion that such a task can be undertaken by attending to the “wearingly continuous opposition,” in her words, of “men” and “women” (7). She is also careful to point out that that meaning of “women” has been shaped and determined by other concepts, notably “Nature, Class, Reason and Humanity” (7). As such, it is misleading to track the changing meanings of women through time, what she terms the “Women Through the Ages Approach,” because this leaves the core of the category unquestioned and assumes that (always incorrect) meanings are simply superimposed upon it. In the passage quoted above, Riley struggles to articulate the work that remains to be done in drawing out humanism’s deep-seated entanglements with gender and race. Although she recognizes that a category is never self-enclosed but is implicated at once in many others, what is significant here is that race gets displaced into an altogether separate terrain. Race demands “analogous moves,” is to be considered in parallel, by comparison, *alongside* gender. But race is never posed as a category to which “women” belongs and is constituted by. This is not the same insight as the feminist mantra that gender, race, class, sexuality, etc. (the etc. gestures to the interchangeability of these terms) are mutually constitutive categories. In the framework of intersectionality, the boundaries of each category are assumed to be self-evident and transparent, and the prescribed task is to name and specify the subject (i.e. white, middle-class, heterosexual woman accurately replaces the generic “woman”). As a result, categories are kept analytically distinct, and creating an inventory is seen to be adequate for capturing their meaning. After making this statement in her introduction, the remainder of Riley’s study offers only passing acknowledgements of race. It appears, then, that the project of tracing the growing sexualization of women is separable from the “empire of racially suffused being” after

all. This is not to single Riley out, but rather to point to a larger problem with the way in which difference is managed within feminist attempts to theorize “women.” To attend to this question, and to disrupt a reading of “women” that engages with race as an analogous category, is what this essay attempts by revisiting (yet again) Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

The body of scholarship on Wollstonecraft is far-reaching and extensive (even carrying its own name, “Wollstonecraft studies”) and reaches beyond feminist circles to literature, history, and political theory. What this reading seeks to contribute to such a daunting volume of work therefore needs to be precisely articulated. Feminist approaches to political theory have overwhelmingly focused on making visible women’s exclusion from the definition of the political subject, and the lack of coherence in ideas about natural rights. Although this interpretative framework has been invaluable for conceptualizing the problems with abstract categories, the insistence on contradiction can also be limiting because it holds as its standard the ideal of logic, coherence and unity. As Linda Zerilli (1994) contends, such an approach misses the meanings displaced onto woman, and the “symbolic work” performed by this figure in bringing order to the chaos of signification. The critiques of Wollstonecraft’s work have largely remained within this framework, exemplified by Moira Gatens’ (1991) position that the *Vindication* reaches its limit in assuming the neutrality of the rational agent. The unqualified faith that reason can solve social inequalities results in a text, according to Gatens, that “strikes paradox after paradox” (113) and is “plagued with contradictions and irresolvable tensions” (116). The implicit end that guides this line of argumentation is to point out what Wollstonecraft herself was too blind to see.

The framework of paradox and contradiction through which Wollstonecraft’s work has been read is productive for drawing out the concealed set of relations that enable reason to appear neutral, and in so doing, guard masculinity from scrutiny.¹⁴ What

¹⁴ The other notable trend within the scholarship on Wollstonecraft is the seemingly endless preoccupation with her personal life, and more significantly, the tendency to approach her writing as an index to her biography. As such, her corpus of work is subordinate to, and can only supplement and verify, the truth of her existence. Narrated time and again, perhaps most recently in Wendy Gunther-Canada’s *Rebel Writer* (2001), Wollstonecraft’s life is told as a series of failed loves and suicide attempts that led to unconventional relationships (her offer to move in with the married artist Henry Fuseli is a favorite side plot) and a child out of wedlock. Her death in childbirth at the age of thirty-eight, not long after discovering the joys of reciprocated love with the philosopher William Godwin, is the culmination of her tragic life story. Appearing relatively early in her writing career, the two *Vindications* are often cast as the work of an immature and naïve Wollstonecraft, whose lack of self-confidence latched to a boundless

this framework perhaps misses, however, is the meanings at stake in these oppositions. In other words, the more important point is not that such paradoxes exist within Wollstonecraft's argument, which is where Gatens' reading ends, but rather what relationships are being stabilized, contested and consolidated. If we take seriously Zerilli's charge, influenced by de Man, that "every argument is constructed through and dependent upon the very tropes it may eschew as an obstacle to truth" then gesturing to the logical failures in Wollstonecraft's argument cannot be enough (quoted in Zerilli: 6). The question, then, is not whether Wollstonecraft was successful in crafting her argument, but rather how "woman" gains meaning in this text. As this chapter seeks to argue, what is at stake in Wollstonecraft's commitment to proving that reason (and along with it the soul, mind, knowledge and virtue) is sexless is the very neutrality of concepts. To put it otherwise, the entire apparatus of reason rests on the possibility that concepts can be disentangled from difference. The structure of the analogy is thus inadequate for dealing with the production of race and gender in the *Vindication*, for the neutrality of reason is made available to women through the "racially suffused being" that Riley only gestures to in passing. As such, the difference of the racialized other is both needed and foreclosed, to borrow Spivak's phrase, within the defense of women's equality.

This chapter breaks Wollstonecraft's argument down to its four central claims, and traces the concepts that come into play in making each of these claims coherent.

"Woman" emerges from this reading as a deeply unstable site of meaning that continually

optimism caused her to repudiate emotion, and place her faith entirely in reason's potential to reform the world. As she experienced the trauma of rejection and struggled to establish lasting relationships, her understanding of reason also shifted. The two novels, travel narrative, and letters that came later in her life make room for the role of emotion, passion, and imagination in shaping an individual. The evolution of her writing is thus read as a reflection of her own self-evolution. This approach to Wollstonecraft's corpus retains an attachment to the notion of the "real" as the ground of interpretation. The author's life is seen to saturate the meaning of the work, rather than, as Barthes (1977) would say, "it is the work of Proust, of Genet, which allows their lives to be read as text" (161). Stretching from Mary Poovey (1984) to Gunther-Canada, the incessant psychologizing of Wollstonecraft repeats the cliched mode of engagement with women's writing as the reflection of personal struggle and tribulation. Moreover, it operates with a model of language as representation, that is, as communicating some pre-existing truth. The biography of Wollstonecraft thus functions as the ever-present backdrop that stabilizes and brings meaning to her written texts. These are well-rehearsed critiques, but what is perhaps more interesting is how the particularly troubling aspects of the *Vindication* are contained by attributing them to the state of Wollstonecraft's underdeveloped mind. In so doing, the operation of reason in this text, and the relationship to difference that it prescribes, is safely positioned along a trajectory towards a more balanced and sympathetic view of women's struggle that finds its expression in her later works. However, the relationship between women's rights and progress, or equality and civilization, that moves the argument of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* exerts a much more sustained hold on the trajectory of feminism, and cannot be so easily cloistered away as the relic of the writer's youthful naivety.

escapes the grasp of the categories through which she is being contained. Following the shifting ways in which “woman” is produced throughout this text does the work of unraveling oppositions that are foundational to the Enlightenment episteme, including nature/civilization, knowledge/prejudice, and freedom/slavery. As a result, “woman” is implicated in a conceptual structure that far exceeds the terms of sexual difference, and as this chapter seeks to argue, provides the anchor for a racialized hierarchy of civilization. What follows is an outline of the chapter’s structure as it moves through each of Wollstonecraft’s claims. First, the *Vindication* contends that women are equal to men because all humans are endowed with reason. Premised upon the singularity of reason, equality is defined through a relationship of similarity, that is, in terms of woman’s sameness to man. This conception of woman as a subject that, in the face of reason, is indistinguishable from man relies upon difference to mark the exterior of rationality, a difference variously figured as the savage, the barbaric and the slave. Having established the universality of reason, Wollstonecraft must then account for why these conditions have not been satisfied. The second claim is that woman’s subordinate state proves her exclusion from reason. To illustrate this, Wollstonecraft exhaustively documents the myriad facets of women’s degraded, materialistic and ignorant condition. Because reason apprehends difference as inequality, woman can only represent an incomplete or failed version of man. The text therefore demands an account of women’s inferiority to justify the claim for equal rights. What others have identified as the misogyny of Wollstonecraft’s argument is thus more productively recast as emerging from the way the principle of equality has been thought. Moreover, woman’s potential for reform is premised upon her capacity for choice, a capacity that is denied to the racialized other, and hence the staging of woman as an autonomous and agential subject relies upon the difference of the slave who is governed by instinct rather than reason. Thirdly, Wollstonecraft draws out the implications of women’s condition and establishes the necessity of an intervention. Barred from developing the faculty of reason, woman is posed as an obstacle to the development of perfection, otherwise figured as the advancement of civilization. The patriarchy of the other, cursorily invoked throughout the *Vindication*, functions to effectively racialize inequality, thereby rendering the patriarchy of the self legible through difference. As such, the danger of woman lies in that she collapses the distinction between self and other, and brings the barbaric within

the boundaries of civilization. Lastly, the text turns to the solution to women's inferiority. If woman is undeserving of equality in her present state, education promises to transform the irrational subject into a rational one. Equality is consequently projected into the future, a future that will unveil the truth of woman, and bound to a notion of progress that is measured by the static difference of the other who is fated to repeat the present as the past. This deferral of meaning (into a future that, by definition, cannot be reached) is absolutely crucial because the text cannot ultimately confront the fate of woman that it has prescribed. In the model of a perfected humanity, there is no place for woman. Pulling apart the structure of Wollstonecraft's argument reveals that the *Vindication's* appeal to woman's shared rationality, an appeal that has been neatly slotted away as caught within the contradictory terms of equality-difference,¹⁵ relies upon the continual production of racial difference. As this reading suggests, the feminist subject is deeply intertwined with broader colonial logics in ways that have yet to be fully dismantled.

Including Woman Within Rational Humanity

Written shortly following her response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Wollstonecraft's treatment of the rights of woman is inflected by the climate of the French revolutionary war and the challenge to the reign of inheritance that marks its moment. To insist upon the text's inseparability from the French Revolution is not a historicist claim that explains Wollstonecraft's treatise in relation to its context, but rather one that attends to how the understanding of "woman" articulated in her treatise is inseparable from the debate over the foundations of authority in which it is inserted.¹⁶ Animated by the rejection of inherited power, the *Vindication* works to establish reason as the foundational ground of the human: "Reason is...the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth. Every individual is in this respect a world in itself. More or less may be conspicuous in one

¹⁵ This refers to the argument, made by Joan Scott (1996) amongst others, that the history of feminism can be characterized by the tension between two positions: the argument for equality (premised upon women's sameness to man) and the recognition of essential difference (the special attributes and characteristics unique to women).

¹⁶ To insist on "context," as do the many scholars of Wollstonecraft's work, is to take such a concept for granted as offering transparent access to the "real." It is, in other words, to ignore the narration involved in any account of context, and hence its inseparability from fiction.

being than another; but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator...” (147). As the grounding principle of the human-as-individual, reason gains meaning through its universality, and therefore woman is assimilated into the domain of reason through an insistence on the fundamental sameness of the individual. The individual is defined tautologically by the capacity for reason, which is both contained within itself (endowed by God) and cultivated through engagement with the world. The tension between reason as condition and reason as process already begins to emerge here, for it is both the prerequisite of the individual as well as its end. As the purveyor of truth, the individual is located at the center of the world, the point from and towards which all knowledge refers. Reason is a kind of “relay-station” that connects the individual to the world, and simultaneously poses the individual as a microcosm of the world. In this relationship, the individual is marked by irreducible uniqueness as “a world in itself,” and yet reason can only conceptualize individuals as variations of the same, and thus the relationship between the individual (specificity) and the world (totality) relies upon their conflation. In this appeal to a universal foundation of the human, a hierarchy still pervades, for as Wollstonecraft acknowledges, individuals may be endowed with “more or less.” This qualification poses individuals as having innately different capacities for reason, and by implication, opens up the possibility of being “more or less” human. Within the structure of reason, difference is conceived in terms of degrees of rationality, and hence, as inequality. The individual, while always a repetition of another, is marked by difference that is measured as distance from reason.

Within this understanding of the individual, the difference of ‘woman’ must be either assimilated or denied. In *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, Joan Scott (1996) argues that the abstract individual is defined in opposition to the difference of woman, and as such, individuality is conceptually bound to masculinity. To cite a wide body of scholarship, this is why woman cannot simply be added to the category of the individual, citizen or human. Feminist political theorists have long worked to articulate how man stands for the universal human and thus provides the prototype for the abstract individual, while woman is identified with the particularity of sexual difference.¹⁷ In tension with this

¹⁷ In addition to Joan Scott, examples include Wendy Brown (1988), Susan Okin (1979), Mary Lyndon Shanley and Carol Pateman (1991), and Carol Pateman (1989). Alternatively, Christine DiStefano (1991)

formulation, the individual is also defined by an irreducible uniqueness, that is, as distinct from any other. This distinctiveness, moreover, is secured once again by opposition to woman, who is now characterized by generality. Scott quotes Cesare Lombroso as exemplary of this position: “All women fall into the same category, whereas each man is an individual unto himself. The physiognomy of the former conforms to a generalized standard, that of the latter is in each case unique” (10). Wollstonecraft describes these very exclusions and contests the singular standard assigned to woman: “Men are allowed by moralists to cultivate, as Nature directs, different qualities, and assume the different characters, that the same passions, modified almost to infinity, give to each individual... but all women are to be leveled, by meekness and docility, into one character of yielding softness and gentle compliance” (202). Woman is thus at once defined by a particularity that resists abstraction, and a generality emptied of difference. The *Vindication* seizes upon the singularity of reason to argue against this double standard, an attempt that nevertheless remains caught within a structure that takes man as the embodiment of the human. This is the central argument that Joan Scott has worked to articulate, and her insights concerning the contradictory position inhabited by feminists has been crucial to demonstrating why it cannot be a matter of simply including the excluded. At the same time, the static coupling of woman-as-irrational and man-as-reason cannot capture the ways that “woman” constantly escapes the grasp of these terms. In other words, the attempt to link woman to irrationality perpetually fails. It is this instability, however, that can be most useful in dismantling such an opposition. To employ Derrida’s term, woman is the differance of reason.¹⁸

To follow the theoretical framework offered by Joan Scott, then, would suggest that Wollstonecraft draws upon concepts that are configured through sexual difference, and by consequence, her efforts to establish woman as a rational individual inadvertently reproduces the terms of her exclusion. However, the rational individual is defined through relationships of difference that are not limited to, or constrained by, the register

argues that the model of the autonomous liberal individual hinges upon the repression of the mother.

¹⁸ Differance refers to the deferrals and differentiations that enable meaning. If the concept always carries the trace of what has been suppressed, reason is inextricable from woman. Woman, then, is not merely the opposite of reason, but a term that constantly threatens to undo the identity of man and the stability of political meaning. Fixing woman as the opposite of rational man is an attempt to stabilize this play of meaning: “simple irrationality, the opposite of reason, are less irritating and waylaying for classical logic” (Derrida 1997: 154).

of sexual difference. Attending to the other relations that render the concept of reason coherent suggest that racial difference is not a parallel construction, but rather constitutive of woman as a subject of rights. The *Vindication* makes the argument for women's equality by appealing to, and hence defining, the underlying unity of the human. As a result, identifying the absolute distinction between the human and the animal emerges as a central source of concern. Such an endeavor, as Talal Asad (2000) points out, is always a political one because it functions to name and identify the contours of humanity. Establishing the boundaries of the human, then, also and at once produces the category of the inhuman, an insight that emerges from the *Vindication* itself. If reason is the property of the individual, it is also what marks the human's difference from the animal: "In what does man's pre-eminence over the brute creation consist? The answer is as clear as that a half is less than the whole; in Reason" (95). Her contention that such truths are so commonsensical that it is "almost impertinent" to state them reveals their foundational status as norms beyond the realm of scrutiny, but also a certain anxiety about what such scrutiny might uncover (95). As a third term that exceeds these categorizations, woman threatens to undermine the dichotomous logic of Wollstonecraft's ordering of the world. Struggling to maintain these distinctions, the *Vindication* manages the difference of woman, who is at once human and yet lacking in rationality, by aligning her with the animal. "...The only way women can rise in the world [is] by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry...they dress; they paint, and nickname God's creatures.—Surely these weak beings are only fit for seraglio" (93)! Here and throughout the text, the animal functions as an analogy for women's inequality. But as these lines reveal, what is at stake in the category of the animal is also an ordering of the world in which the self is linked to the human, a relationship that sets the stage for the colonial project. The passage moves flawlessly from the animal to racial difference, linking woman's degraded state of animality to the harem. As a result, women's activities and pursuits are rendered inferior through their association with a bestialized other. The woman that is both the subject of, and interpellated by,¹⁹ her treatise is consolidated in

¹⁹ Althusser (1972) stresses the structure of recognition that is necessary to the constitution of subjects. To draw loosely upon his insights, the *Vindication* performs the work of identifying and naming what constitutes the subject "woman." Quite apart from whether the audience is men, which a certain branch of Wollstonecraft studies debates at length, her treatise solicits the recognition of women as women.

opposition to the anonymous other belonging to the seraglio.²⁰ Even more significantly, women's oppression is subsequently rendered into a characteristic of the inhuman, a point that will be returned to later.

Wollstonecraft's treatise thus builds from the premise that all individuals, by virtue of their membership within humanity, are rational and hence equal to one another. How, then, does the text account for reason? What precisely does it mean to be rational? To return to the passage quoted earlier, reason is above all the means to truth: reason is "the simple power of improvement...of discerning truth." To be a rational human is to be in the process of improving, that is, to be reaching for truth. It is education, as we shall see later, that incites such improvement. Receiving only a "disorderly kind of education," women's actions are defined in opposition to these principles: "this negligent kind of guesswork, for what other epithet can be used to point out the random exertions of a sort of instinctive common sense, never brought to the test of reason? prevents [women from] generalizing matters of fact—so they do today, what they did yesterday, merely because they did it yesterday" (109).²¹ The reason that lies inherent in every individual requires education as its catalyst, for a wrong or incomplete education will produce subjects who are motivated by instinct rather than reason. As a result, woman is fated to repetition because she looks to the past as the guide for the present. In so doing, she undermines not only the pursuit of knowledge, but also the definition of the human whose identity is constituted by progress. Reason therefore relies upon the temporal distinctions between past, present, and future to project its origins within nature and chart a trajectory to its always-deferred fulfillment. In the terrain of thought that gave rise to Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, such temporal categories are intimately enmeshed with the task of defining the human. More explicitly, the difference between them is figured through a hierarchy of man: the past belongs to primitive man, the savage, those close to the state of nature, while the future is what civilization claims for itself, and into which the present is constantly propelled. In Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, the concept of the future comes about as man evolves. Savage man, whose "modest needs" can be satisfied in the present

²⁰ The harem is not to be understood as an anthropological given, but rather as a fiction produced by the text. This fiction is one that Wollstonecraft's predecessor, Catherine Macaulay Graham, also drew upon to illustrate women's oppression.

²¹ Wollstonecraft's plea for women's education, however, is by no means universal, but is rigidly organized by class distinctions, as will become apparent further in the chapter. The hierarchy of class further pervades Wollstonecraft's description of domestic equality, which takes for granted the labor of the servant.

moment and whose imagination “suggests nothing to him,” does not have an awareness of the future (117). Indeed, he cannot even grasp the coming of the end of the day. Rousseau’s account of the past cannot do without the savage of the present, which is made available as an object of knowledge by anthropology: “Such is, even today, the degree of foresight of the Carib: in the morning he sells his bed of cotton and in the evening he comes weeping to buy it back, for want of having foreseen that he would need it for the coming night” (117). The Carib, “that of all existing peoples which until now has departed least from the state of nature,” provides living proof that the future is not available to all (135). Anthropological knowledge literalizes the distinction between future and present as that between self and other. The concept of the future is therefore networked through the difference of the other whose present is the past. It can be said, then, that Wollstonecraft’s description of women’s plight is enabled by the difference of the savage. Like the savage in Rousseau, whose soul “agitated by nothing, is given over to the sole sentiment of its present existence,” woman is too preoccupied with the present to engage with the future (117). As a result, woman concedes to the conditions of her oppression: “Men...submit everywhere to oppression...instead of asserting their birthright, they quietly lick the dust, and say, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. Women, I argue from analogy, are degraded by the same propensity to enjoy the present moment” (146). Resonating with the savage, woman is produced as a difference that inhabits the present without investing in the future. The distinction, small but significant, is that woman bases her enjoyment of the present on a concept of tomorrow.

Linked to improvement and opposed to repetition, reason provides a structure and purpose to human action. What is figured as ‘woman’ is the unsettling possibility that thought and action do not reach towards the accomplishment of any end, but rather turn and return upon the same. Improvement is therefore opposed to an occupation that has no defined end, which is given the name “pleasure” by this text. Woman is incapable of “discerning” truth, and hence improving herself, because she is committed to pleasure rather than reason: “Pleasure is the business of woman’s life, according to the present modification of society, and while it continues to be so, little can be expected from such weak beings” (149). Pleasure, in other words, is what education promises to supplant with reason. Wollstonecraft’s concern with the unruliness of pleasure runs throughout her treatise, and she struggles to contain it by condoning everything from beauty and

consumption to (sexual) passion. Displaced onto woman, the threat posed by pleasure is managed by marking it as a byproduct of inequality. One avenue into tracing the meanings at play in this concept is the preoccupation with dress, a theme the text persistently returns to and attempts to account for. Precisely because it signals a moment of anxiety, Wollstonecraft's treatment of this problematic reveals the stakes involved in the suppression of pleasure. Contesting the assumption shared by Rousseau and Dr. Gregory that women should "cultivate a fondness for dress" because such fondness is "natural to them," she argues that women's concern with their appearance is based instead upon "a love of power" (116). Motivated by vanity, the "frippery of dress" is dangerous, according to Wollstonecraft, because it privileges the body and thereby "weakens the mind" (176). The pleasure and meaning associated with dress can only be a diversion away from the only appropriate object of reason, that is, the pursuit of knowledge. Cast as a zero-sum relationship, attention to the body takes away from the mind. In other parts of the text, Wollstonecraft recounts with frustration the endless amount of time that women devote to their appearance, and their apparently insatiable interest in "their persons." The mind is made available as an object of cognition in opposition to the (mindless) activities of woman that have the body as their object. The body thus emerges as the mark of a difference that exceeds the ideal of the disembodied rational individual, a difference that cannot be thought by this text.

In the very last pages of her treatise, Wollstonecraft returns once again to the topic of dress noting that "a strong inclination for external ornaments ever appears in barbarous states, only the men not the women adorn themselves" (322). While posing a relationship of similarity with barbarism, the introduction of a difference marked by the "only" serves to secure the hierarchy of reason disrupted by woman: "...where women are allowed to be so far on a level with men [in adorning themselves], society has advanced, at least, one step in civilization" (322). Revising her previous articulation, Wollstonecraft suggests that preoccupation with dress is "natural to mankind" and therefore not specific to sexual or civilizational difference (322). However, this desire is immediately transposed onto race, and rendered a property of the savage: "an immoderate fondness for dress, for pleasure, and for sway, are the passions of the savages; the passions that occupy those uncivilized beings who have not yet extended the dominion of the mind..." (324).²²

²² Although the savage and the barbaric should not be understood as synonymous terms given that their

Woman and savage are thus conceptually related in their concern with the body and commitment to pleasure over reason. However, they are also separated by an absolute difference: the savage's inferiority is a condition of their being, while woman's inferiority is not proper to the self. The pleasure associated with dress defines the nature of the savage, whereas for woman such pleasure is "unnatural." Through this subtle gesture, the savage is foreclosed from reason, and this foreclosure is precisely what enables woman to emerge as a subject with the potential for rationality. Woman's "inclination" for dress is posed as a relic of savagery, rather than a desire that is essential to her. Put otherwise, the difference of the savage is necessary for rendering the end of reason coherent, and posing the commitment to pleasure as that which must be eliminated.

Upon closer examination, however, the opposition between reason and pleasure, an opposition that organizes sexual and racial difference, cannot be sustained by the text. Pleasure returns to mark the distinctiveness of the rational individual: "when the mind is not sufficiently opened to take pleasure in reflection, the body will be adorned with sedulous care; and ambition will appear in tattooing or painting it" (323). Attention to the body, epitomized by the distinctly racialized image of tattooed and painted skin, is linked to an underdeveloped mind, or one that is not open to "take pleasure in reflection."²³ Pleasure is again what distinguishes the human from the savage, but this time it is linked to the structure of reason such that the love of dress is now attributed to a lack of pleasure. In this move, the difference holding apart the constellation of terms human, woman, and savage deconstitutes itself. In the evidence she offers to support her claim, Wollstonecraft notes that, along with servants, the slave spends all their "hardly earned savings" on "a little tawdry finery" (322). Unlike woman, the slave's devotion to dress is an insurmountable part of their nature: "even the hellish yoke of slavery cannot stifle the savage desire for admiration which the black heroes inherit from both their parents" (322).²⁴ Characterized as an inheritance, the desire for admiration is outside the willful

difference is crucial to later racial taxonomies, Wollstonecraft often slips back and forth between the two.

²³ Bacon associates the painting of the body with the savage in his *History of Life and Death*, pg 267.

²⁴ Slavery was still legal in Britain at the time of Wollstonecraft's treatise, and remained so until the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 emancipated all slaves within the jurisdiction of the British empire. In the *Vindication of the Rights of Man*, Wollstonecraft opposes slavery to reason, and argues that Burke's "servile reverence for antiquity" justifies the continuation of the slave trade (20). And yet, her treatise on the rights of woman reveals a more ambivalent relationship to abolition, even though slavery functions as the central metaphor for inherited power and women's subordination. In a symptomatic passage, anxiety about the freedom of the irrational subject comes to the fore: "Slaves and mobs have always indulged in the same

control of the slave and leads to actions that defy self-interest. This unshakeable desire, marked as savage, produces the consciousness of the slave as determined by the past. The slave thus offers living proof that savagery is a condition that exerts a permanent hold over its future subjects. Constituted in difference from the savage, the desire expressed by woman is subject to her will, and as a result, can be shaped and reformed through education. Wollstonecraft invokes the analogy of slavery throughout her treatise to underline the severity of women's oppression, but as this passage makes clear, such identification with the plight of the slave not only retains a hierarchy of difference, but also consolidates white woman as the true object of empathy and rightful subject of political intervention.²⁵

The emphasis on choice allows Wollstonecraft to challenge the notion that woman's difference (and hence inferiority) is inscribed in nature. For Rousseau, her major interlocutor, the unruliness and depravity of woman is a topic he dedicates entire books to correcting. Amidst his long-winded deprecation of femininity, however, lies a more complicated relationship to woman's difference. In her study tracing the alignment of reason with masculinity in Western philosophy, Genevieve Lloyd (1984) positions Rousseau as marking a break from Enlightenment thinkers like Bacon who saw the development of (empirical) knowledge as the conquering of nature. Instead, Rousseau depicts the emergence of reason as the corruption of man, a narrative that is set against woman's closeness to nature. Reason is not rejected altogether, however, but is refigured as progress to an improved natural state. As described by Lloyd, "nature lies both in the past, as an object of Reason's backward-looking nostalgia, and in the future, as the goal of reason's fulfillment" (59). This narrative of man's trajectory through the fall and ultimate salvation of reason is dependent upon the difference of woman standing in for nature. As such, the glorification of femininity and the assumption of woman's natural subordination to man are not mutually exclusive.²⁶ Wollstonecraft attempts to intervene in this nostalgic idealization of woman by shifting her association with nature, and

excesses, when once they broke loose from authority—The bent bow recoils with violence, when the hand is suddenly relaxed that forcibly held it..." (186).

²⁵ Michele Birnbaum (1994) critiques the analogy of slavery deployed by feminists, arguing that the structure of identification emphasizes white women's difference from the racialized other.

²⁶ As Wollstonecraft discusses in the first vindication, Edmund Burke very blatantly tied the ideal of womanhood embodied by Marie Antoinette to the "glory of Europe" under attack by the French Revolution, while simultaneously defending a hierarchy of sexual difference (65).

presenting her difference as a matter of choice. Consequently, women are subjects that have self-consciously rejected the path to rationality, and placed their own immediate self-interest above that of the whole. As in the following passage, it is woman's submission to the differences assigned to sex that places her outside the bounds of humanity and civilization: "Why do women...condescend to receive a degree of attention and respect from strangers, different from the reciprocation of civility which the dictates of humanity and the politeness of civilization authorize between man and man" (150)? The fiction of choice, and the willful and consenting subject who accompanies it, is necessary to the subject of feminism that Wollstonecraft's treatise calls into being. More succinctly, this fiction is its condition of possibility. Within this foundational text of women's rights, choice allows woman to lay claim to reason (albeit in the future, as will be discussed shortly) and rescues her from the clasps of nature. Choice is what the savage cannot exercise, and what is absent from the oppression of the other. Already here, it is clear that the subjection of the self (which takes the form of frivolity and vanity) is of a markedly different, and more liberated, character than that of the woman confined to the harem. This difference is premised upon the concept of freedom, which we will see, relies on the subjection of the slave.

Although both are opposed to the rational subject, then, woman is distinguished from the slave in that she is the author of her actions and sovereign of her will. The savage, whose decisions and actions are prescribed by inheritance, does not command choice. Working within these terms, Wollstonecraft characterizes the desire to be "woman" as a conscious aspiration for power: "Exalted by their inferiority (this sounds like a contradiction), they constantly demand homage as women, though experience should teach them that the men who pride themselves upon paying arbitrary insolent respect to the sex...are most inclined to tyrannize over, and despise, the very weakness they cherish" (150).²⁷ If the individual is uniquely responsible for their actions, then woman bears the burden for her own subjection. Submitting to this logic, the text elicits condemnation for a figure that (willingly) fails to learn from experience, is "proud of

²⁷ This resonates with the famous passage in Burke's *Reflections* where he decries the end of chivalry brought about by the new "conquering empire of light and reason:" "On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order. All homage paid to the sex in general as such, and without distinct views, is to be regarded as romance and folly" (66). Linda Zerilli (1994) reads this passage as expressing the "abyss of signification" that Burke's treatise attempts to guard against by displacing disorder onto woman.

their weakness” (272), and “glor[ies] in their subjection” (135). Rather than reading such moments as evidence of Wollstonecraft’s inability to identify with the lot of women, it might be better figured as an attempt to reestablish the authority of the autonomous individual that is shaken by woman’s complicity with her own marginalization. As Wollstonecraft develops her critique of society and its system of education, woman appears to diverge from the notion of a conscious self who is solely responsible for its own actions, a self that is the very foundation of Enlightenment rationality. In her account, woman’s choice is inescapably the product of social relations, of institutions such as marriage, as well as the meanings attached to femininity. Society writ large is implicated in the will of woman, and furthermore, her desires are so enmeshed with a self-identity that is not of her own making that it becomes incoherent to separate one from the other. Woman thus forces the text to confront the deeply unsettling question: what distinguishes freedom from slavery? The persistent use of slavery as a metaphor for the oppression of the civilized self functions to avert this crisis in meaning, and hence may not be adequately accounted for, as Moira Ferguson (1996) contends, by deeming it a sign of Wollstonecraft’s emerging abolitionist sympathies.²⁸ When slavery is invoked to describe the inequality associated with everything from the monarchy to wealth to “duties,” there is also a difference being introduced between these terms. In the following sentence, the metaphor functions to distance the slave from the “human species” and to erase the female slave altogether: “Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them...?” (266). Because the meaning of the slave is taken for granted as fixed, this figure provides reassurance that freedom is indeed an obvious and transparent state, even though it seems to constantly evade the grasp of the text. As if to illustrate the tenuousness of this distinction, the metaphor quickly subsides and is replaced by metonymy: “women are... made slaves to their persons, and must render them alluring that man may lend them his reason to guide their tottering steps aright” (266). Women are in a relationship of slavery

²⁸ Moira Ferguson (1996) argues that as Wollstonecraft became increasingly familiar with abolitionist literature, her language shifted from natural rights (in the first vindication) to that of slavery (second vindication). She also works to situate Wollstonecraft’s preoccupation with slavery in relation to the successful revolution by slaves in the French colony of San Domingo (now Haiti) in 1791. The anxieties raised by this revolution led to large setbacks for the abolitionist cause. Ferguson contends that Wollstonecraft is the first writer to link sexual subordination to colonial slavery. Although women writers have used the language of slavery before her, the usage referred to a subjugated daughter or wife and did not carry the connotation of colonial relations.

to themselves, subservient “to their own person.” As such, woman interiorizes the external relations of slavery, rendering the self inseparable from the relations of power that constitute it. The fiction of the autonomous subject becomes increasingly difficult to hold on to, as the conditions of subordination that Wollstonecraft describes are indistinguishable from what woman in effect desires. In other words, if woman’s desires (and the expression of her will) are the effect of her subordination, then what secures the freedom of the subject and the equality that follows from it?

The autonomy of woman thus presents a problem for Wollstonecraft’s treatise, for such a possibility cannot exist within the terms it has set up. Invoking the self-evidence of progress functions to manage these contradictions by projecting equality as something that is yet to come. The present, as the difference of woman attests, is constituted by the failure to fully adhere to the universality of reason. On the one hand, then, the text poses a linear progress of reason that reaches towards civilization, and on the other, it narrates the failure of reason in the current state of society, also labeled as civilization. Wollstonecraft manages this breach in the infallibility of progress by arguing that these lapses are not the product of civilization, as Rousseau would have it, but rather the “vestiges of barbarism” (99). In the brief narrative offered as a counterpoint to *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Wollstonecraft charts the gradual emergence of civilization, notably sidestepping a description of the state of nature. For Rousseau, the state of nature is the focus of a backward-looking nostalgia that provides the origins of woman’s natural subordination to man. His fall narrative of civilization recuperates the past as the endpoint for the future, and thereby forecloses the question of women’s equality. Although the *Vindication* refuses to recognize a prior state of freedom and equality, the concept of society that it remains bound to nevertheless relies upon such a fiction. The narrative begins:

In the infancy of society, when men were just emerging out of barbarism, chiefs and priests, touching the most powerful springs of savage conduct, hope and fear, must have unbounded sway. An aristocracy, of course, is naturally the first form of government. But, clashing interests soon losing their equipoise, a monarchy and hierarchy break out of the confusion of ambitious struggles, and the foundation of both is secured by feudal tenures. This appears to be the origin of monarchical and priestly powers, and the dawn of civilization. But such combustible materials cannot long be pent up; and, getting vent in foreign wars and intestine insurrections, the people acquire some power in the tumult, which obliges their rulers to gloss over their oppression with a shew of right. (103)

These “combustible materials” that bring about the demise of a monarchy built upon feudal land-holdings deserve further attention, for they provide an account of how freedom emerges from a condition of subordination. As Wollstonecraft further explains, after an exposure to “wars, agriculture, commerce and literature,” “the people” come to an understanding of their oppression thereby requiring power to rearticulate itself in new ways (103). The “open force” of monarchical power is replaced by more insidious forms of rule that are reproduced through consent.²⁹ The trajectory to civilization is not straightforward, then, for such transformations keep the same hierarchical social order in place. In particular, Wollstonecraft identifies class distinctions, and the “luxury and superstition” that accompanies them, as the main obstacle to civilization’s progress (103). The question that confronts this narrative, then, is precisely when and how does reason emerge? If “hope and fear” define society’s infancy, and stand for the barbaric, then how does reason come to supplant the irrational? Wollstonecraft balks at this question, displacing the entire problematic to a footnote stating that the overthrow of arbitrary rule naturally comes after “men of abilities scatter the seeds that grow up and have a great influence on the forming opinion,” and reason prevails (103). The spread of reason is initiated by an exclusive few, according to this hurried footnote, and gradually spread to the rest through exposure and tutelage. Her narrative is therefore founded upon the distinction between those naturally endowed with reason, and the rest (including woman) who are its belated subjects. Within the margins of this text, feminism’s entanglement with colonialism charts its course.

As suggested by this narrative of society’s struggle to free itself from the clutches of its aristocratic origins, the *Vindication* accounts for the failure of progress with the enduring power of monarchical rule, and its ability to take on new and unsuspecting forms. Power drawn from inheritance establishes a hierarchy of men based upon “extrinsic advantage[s],” and such advantages defy reason, which is intrinsic to all (136). Progress is therefore figured as the supplanting of inheritance with reason. Woman interrupts this teleology because she stands for rule based on “extrinsic advantage” that exceeds the boundaries of the monarchy, and hence remains after its fall. The spectre of race enters here to account for those who follow a leader described, in Wollstonecraft’s

²⁹ In this sense, the *Vindication* provides an early account of the shift from sovereign power to governmentalized, self-regulating subjects.

acerbic tone, as a “bloated monster that has lost all traces of humanity” (136):

Birth, riches, and every extrinsic advantage that exalt a man above his fellows, without any mental exertion, sink him in reality below them...And that tribes of men, like flocks of sheep, should quietly follow such a leader, is a solecism that only a desire of present enjoyment and narrowness of understanding can solve. (136)

These “tribes of men,” who defer to authority without looking to reason, are placed within the category of the animal. It is thus the mark of the inhuman to be incapable of discerning between legitimate and illegitimate authority. Inherited authority is once more linked to racial difference, and it is against this backdrop that woman is constituted as a fallen, yet recuperable, civilized subject.

The tenacity of inherited authority is further linked to the circulation of knowledge separated from its foundations, in contrast to the rational individual who is the sole producer of all that it knows to be true. The opposition between reason and inheritance is thus mapped onto the distinction between knowledge with traceable origins and knowledge that gains its authority through repetition:

“...such deeply rooted prejudices have clouded reason, and such spurious qualities have assumed the name of virtues, that it is necessary to pursue the course of reason as it has been perplexed and involved in error, by various adventitious circumstances, comparing the simple axiom with casual deviations. Men, in general, seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices, which they have imbibed, they can scarcely trace how, rather than root them out” (96).

The threat of meaning that cannot be accounted for, that has no foundation in reason, is held at bay by giving it the name “prejudice.” The difference between reason and prejudice, however, is one the text is (yet again) unable to sustain. When knowledge is “imbibed” without evaluating its foundations, this passage asserts, reason can be put to the service of prejudice. And this weakness is not contained to woman, for it is the quality of “men in general.” This suggests, then, that the individual cannot be trusted to exercise reason correctly, or perhaps better put, *reasonably*. Following reason can also lead to prejudice, which by Wollstonecraft’s definition, is that which cannot be substantiated by reason. If reason can also uphold the irrational, that is, if it can also authorize its opposite, then its position as the stable ground of truth, progress and civilization is slowly dethroned.

What is at stake in this attempt to separate reason from prejudice is also the ability to distinguish between different kinds of knowledge. Narrated as the overthrow of

knowledge based on “trust,” Wollstonecraft conceives of women’s liberation through the break from inherited knowledge announced by empiricism. The oppression of women will end, according to this logic, when truth is based on reason rather than tradition or authority. In the struggle to explain man’s deviance from reason, however, the text reveals the inherent unreliability of experienced fact and the impossibility of gathering a complete experience of the object. As the passage above concludes: “Yet the imperfect conclusions thus drawn, are frequently very plausible, because they are built on partial experience, on just, though narrow views” (96). Knowledge acquired through reason can lead to “imperfect conclusions” for incomplete observations are still supported by experience, and therefore appear plausible. The foundation of inequality can thus be summarized in the following conundrum: flawed conclusions (those that presumably uphold woman’s natural inferiority) are also based on experience, and hence according to reason’s own standards, are still “just.”³⁰ Put otherwise, the ability for a part of the object to masquerade for the whole is ultimately responsible for the history of women’s subjugation. Wollstonecraft’s struggle to define prejudice thus points to an insurmountable problem with empiricism: any experience is always partial and incomplete, and consequently will produce conflicting claims. Put differently, knowledge based on fact can always be countered with other facts, which similarly lay claim to reason as their ground. More radically, experience is capable of deceiving the individual, a deception that is particularly troubling because the lie is grounded in truth. Prejudice, then, is most threatening at the point in which it brings truth to its limit and renders it indistinguishable from a lie.

In an effort to manage the ruptures that emerge in her writing, Wollstonecraft introduces another layer of authorization: knowledge does not rest upon observation itself, but rather on the subsequent move to generalization: “the power of generalizing ideas, of drawing comprehensive conclusions from individual observations, is the only acquirement, for an immortal being, that really deserves the name knowledge” (148). The difference of woman, then, is that of a subject who observes “without endeavoring to account for anything” (148). The wrong done to woman is that she has been led to “take

³⁰ Virginia Sapiro (1992) also draws attention to Wollstonecraft’s understanding of “prejudice” in *A Vindication of Political Virtue*, noting its association with “immature minds” and thought based on pre-established views (56).

things on trust” (147) and “prevent[ed]...from generalizing their observations” (149) rather than recognized as a sovereign author of knowledge. Woman will thus be liberated from her position as “either a slave or a despot” once she is admitted into the sphere of the knowing subject, or more specifically, once she follows the lessons of inductive reasoning and moves past the domain of particularity (148). She must learn, in other words, that the specific is an example of a general rule. The argument for women’s equality can thus be said to be premised upon the repression of singularity. But what, precisely, does the move from individual observation to generalization entail? For if the individual can be led astray, or perhaps more strongly, *deceived* by observation, what secures the accuracy of the generalization? Put simply, what guarantees that the generalization is not based upon inadequate or incomplete observations? While these questions begin to erode empiricism’s link between observation and knowledge, the central opposition that moves Wollstonecraft’s text is also at play: reason’s difference from inherited authority. The ability to generalize, as Wollstonecraft herself admits, “is not very common amongst men or women” (148). While reason might be common to all, it is only an elite few that can put it to use for the acquisition of knowledge. Even more significantly, it is only this few that will not be deceived by reason into believing the irrational. As a result, it is only those capable of generalizing their observations, those who can discern truth from prejudice, whose knowledge can be trusted. And here the text comes full circle back to trust, which it had opposed to reason and identified as the source of woman’s subordination. For the majority, the authority of reason and its position as the ground of truth must simply be trusted.

In addition to limiting the sphere of potential knowledge producers, the emphasis on generalization unsettles the relationship between knowledge and its object. The exercise of reason, as posed by the *Vindication*, unveils a truth that is proper to the object and hence independent of the subject. Placing the “power of generalization” as the authorizing principle displaces the locus of knowledge from the object to the subject, opening up a challenge to the ground of reason. Of course, the move from the particular to the general is not unique to Wollstonecraft’s conception of knowledge, nor is it heterogeneous to empiricism. As de Man suggests in his reading of the *Second Discourse*, for Rousseau the ability to form general ideas is linked to language and marks the specificity of the human: “This is one of the reasons why animals could never acquire

such ideas, nor the perfectibility that depends on it” (quoted in de Man 142). Perfectibility is therefore tied to the movement from particular perception to general idea. But as de Man demonstrates, this opposition is based upon the distinction between the denominative (literal) and the conceptual (figural) aspects of language, an opposition Rousseau’s text itself poses as an error, albeit the error that allows for the possibility of language (152).³¹ In Wollstonecraft’s model of knowledge, the individual gathers together a collection of partial observations and generates a “comprehensive” account from conflicting information. The *Vindication* thus (inadvertently) makes visible what the account must constantly conceal: that it is nothing but an interpretation, a futile attempt on the part of the subject to impose order onto the disorder of difference. In Wollstonecraft’s conception of knowledge, the account marks woman’s difference from man, for woman does not seek to locate the rational ground of truth: “For women sometimes declare that they love, or believe, certain things, *because* they love, or believe them” (225). So the question must be posed, what kind of knowing is given the name “woman” in this text? The possibility of truth relies upon the notion that the account provides an exhaustive description of the object, or that the object can be fully represented to the subject. In not endeavoring to “account for anything,” woman challenges the sovereignty of the knowing subject. Woman is the possibility of a knowing that does not seek to secure the object for a subject, a possibility that the principle of reason cannot admit because it throws into question what it means to know. At stake here is the model of cognition that holds that the object referred to can be secured such that others can know this same object (de Man 120). This is perhaps why the figure of the woman who observes without establishing relations between things is so disruptive to Wollstonecraft.

Establishing Woman’s Exclusion

To review the structure of Wollstonecraft’s argument thus far, women are equal to men because all humans are endowed with reason. This capacity for reason, as we have

³¹ Rousseau at first seems to privilege the literal as prior to the figural: “all individual entities appear in isolation to the mind [of primitive man]. If one oak tree was called A, another was called B...” (145). But this straight-forward schema is immediately troubled by the remark that follows: “for the first *idea* we derive from two things is that they are not the same...” (148). To greatly simplify de Man’s complex reading: “denomination has to postulate the concept (or idea) of difference in order to come into being” (153).

seen, is premised upon a hierarchy that conceives of difference as inequality. Furthermore, reason is rendered coherent through a series of oppositions that include inherited knowledge, pleasure, slavery and prejudice. Woman is linked to each of these opposing terms, and as such, the effort to pin down her meaning is also an attempt to stabilize the concept of reason, freedom, improvement and truth. To follow the argument to its next claim, the injustice done to woman is that she has been excluded from reason, and women's inferiority stands as proof of such exclusion. As a result, Wollstonecraft presents women as debased individuals constituted by lack. The following symptomatic passage is worth quoting at length:

In short, women, in general, as well as the riches of both sexes, have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit... Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling... Ever restless and anxious, their over exercised sensibility not only renders them uncomfortable themselves, but troublesome, to use a soft phrase, to others. All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion... Miserable, indeed, must be that being whose cultivation of mind has only tended to inflame its passions!... The passions thus pampered, whilst the judgment is left unformed, what can be expected to ensue?—Undoubtedly, a mixture of madness and folly! (157)

Many scholars have grappled with the text's demonization of women, and the popular representation of ignorant and materialistic dependents who actively perpetuate their own oppression that it has bequeathed. To find such a portrayal of woman in what is popularly taken to be the foundational treatise on women's rights is indeed troubling. The explanations run the full gamut from reading it as a sign of Wollstonecraft's troubled psyche and lack of self-confidence, to the "mask" she wears to appeal to male readers.³² In one of the more sophisticated reflections on this question, Susan Gubar (1995) argues that there is a "dialogic relationship" between feminism and misogyny, or stated differently, misogyny is feminism's condition of emergence (142). Her point is that because feminism seeks to challenge and displace misogynistic scripts, it must necessarily work within and inhabit its terms. While Gubar does not fully work out the implications of this relationship, her insight suggests that Wollstonecraft's searing critique of women is precisely what enables her argument for equality. Her treatise repeats the discourses through which sexual difference is rendered coherent, and this repetition makes visible the meanings that specify and determine the category "woman." Exactly because there is no other truth to retreat to, Wollstonecraft closely parallels the very representations she is seeking to contest. Notably, none of the scholarship that grapples with Wollstonecraft's misogyny, to follow Gubar's terminology, considers whether the concept of reason can tolerate woman. Given that reason has a singular form, woman can only be the failed version of man, or an individual that has yet to attain full rationality. This is why the *Vindication*, although presenting itself as a defense of women's rights, can only conceive of woman as a difference undeserving of equality. In attempting to disassociate this inferiority from natural deficiency, Wollstonecraft returns once again to the seductive power of arbitrary rule. Likened to the corruption of inherited authority, woman's power is not based upon the merits or achievements of the individual but on pre-established sovereignty. This sovereignty is that of beauty, a power that nature has uniquely granted to woman: "Inheriting, in a lineal descent from the first fair defect in nature, the sovereignty of beauty, [women] have, to

³² Examples of such arguments include: Vlasopolos (1980) and Poovey (1984). In a particularly convoluted instantiation of this argument, Moira Ferguson (1996) contends that Wollstonecraft's suppressed solidarity with women expresses itself through an identification with the slave, and black women more specifically.

maintain their power, resigned their natural rights, which the exercise of reason might have procured them, and chosen rather to be short-lived queens rather than labour to obtain the sober pleasures that arise from equality” (150).³³ Women have willingly and self-consciously rescinded their natural rights by choosing “lawless power” (135). As a result, woman is excluded from the domain of the free and equal individual because she violates the law of the social contract; that is, she rejects the consensus over reason that founds society. As it is articulated here, the concept of natural rights carries within it a burden of proof, for the individual must demonstrate a commitment to reason before accessing the rights guaranteed by nature.

In addition to locating woman as a free and agential subject, a move that is necessary for challenging the natural inferiority attached to sexual difference (and that relies, as we have seen, on racial difference), this refusal of equality completes the myth of a prior freedom that structures the concept of society. Woman marks the very possibility of refusal, and in doing so, shores up the consenting individual that is the organizing principle of the social contract. For Wollstonecraft, equality is earned through labor, and to refuse the labor of reason places one (here, woman) outside the jurisdiction of natural rights. It is thus only through labor that woman can be admitted into the domain of the human: “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them their lost dignity—and make them, as part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world” (137). The subject that occupies a position of inequality, that is, difference, must therefore labor to be granted equality. By consequence, the subject marked with a difference from universal man cannot be the bearer of rights in the present; the future, as we have already seen, is further reserved for those subjects who exert control over their inheritance.

Woman as a Threat to Civilization

Up to this point, the chapter has mapped out the claim of women’s inequality

³³ Wollstonecraft’s suspicion of beauty invokes Edmund Burke’s characterization of the contrast between the beautiful and the sublime. As Zerilli (1994) argues, this distinction is both hierarchical and distinctly gendered. (Womanly) beauty and the (manly) sublime are irreconcilable, according to Burke, because they stand on “different foundations” (quoted in Zerilli 64). In the *Vindication*, (womanly) beauty and (manly) reason are mapped onto the distinction between nature and society/civilization, and hence the former is also irreconcilable with the latter. And yet, in this passage, beauty is what nature has granted to woman, and hence what is most proper to her.

articulated by the *Vindication* and the proof that is demanded by it. The next question to consider is how the text accounts for the implications of such inequality. In other words, how does Wollstonecraft conceptualize the necessity for action? What consequences are attached to the plight of women? As has already begun to emerge, reason establishes the progress of civilization through a measured distance from nature. The distinction between nature and civilization is therefore part of the organizing framework of Wollstonecraft's argument, and it is to this opposition that the next section now turns. Figured as a lack of rationality, women's inferiority is constituted as a problem because it poses a threat to the very possibility of civilization itself. As Carol Pateman suggests, the nature/civilization dichotomy is closely associated with the earlier opposition between the state of nature and civil society.³⁴ Yet for her it is necessary to keep these contrasts separate, for a principle way that the sexual contract remains hidden from view is by narrating the development of civil society as a story about the origins of civilization. Such a story, she argues, masks the origin of political right, and more specifically, that men alone are constituted as free and equal individuals capable of entering into a contract. In Wollstonecraft's treatise, however, civilization substitutes for society. The intimacy between these terms suggests that woman is refashioned as a rational subject through a network of meanings that is founded upon racial hierarchy. While integral to the articulation of women's equality, racial difference is constantly relegated to the peripheries of the text. In *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak (1999) traces the ways in which sexual and racial difference get produced in discontinuous ways and through altogether separate trajectories. Although, as Pateman has systematically demonstrated, woman does not own the property in her person and is therefore excluded from the realm of civil society, she nevertheless functions as a central figure in the struggle to articulate the terms of the social contract. By contrast, the racial other is part of the foundational structure of such arguments, but is foreclosed, in Spivak's words, through "casual rhetorical gesture[s]" (30). In the preface to her *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft announces that it is an "affection for the whole human race" that drives her argument for a change in woman's status. By the introduction, however, a casual gesture has circumscribed her

³⁴ The state of nature is not the only contrast to civil society according to Pateman. She argues that "civil society" is fundamentally ambiguous and gains its meaning against a series of terms, including political absolutism and the pre-modern order of status (10).

subject to “the civilized women of the present century” (89). Tracing how the opposition between nature and civilization is formed suggests that the production of racial difference belongs to the structure of the argument, rather than merely signaling the relic of a racism that can be corrected by eliminating civilization as the qualifier for women’s rights.

Turning to Raymond Williams can begin the work of drawing out this argument. Williams (1985) notes that civilization was preceded by “civilize,” meaning “to make a criminal matter into a civil matter, and thence, by extension, to bring within a form of social organization” (58). This mirrors the account of the social contract as an agreement that, in making the crime public and thus punishable by law, makes desirable the subjection of an organized community. As civilization transitioned to a state of “social order and refinement” associated with *civility*, it was specifically opposed to the savage and barbarism. In both of these senses, civilization is inseparable from historical progress, and the attendant notion of human self-development (58). In the late eighteenth century, the term carried both the notion of process as well as a fixed or achieved state. The etymology of civilization reveals a tension between dynamism and stasis, which Wendy Brown (2006) argues gets resolved through a “progressivist Western historiography of modernity” that positions European modernity as the achieved state towards which others are steadily moving towards (179). Brown’s reading emphasizes how the dual meaning of civilization as both state and process functioned in the service of colonialism and justified the superiority of the West. What is lost in such an account, however, is the play of meaning that constantly threatens to undo the stability of this concept. As postcolonial scholars have pointed out, if the identity of the West as civilization is constituted in movement, it must constantly develop and produce itself anew. The same goes for the “I” who thinks of itself as autonomous, and as belonging to the self. This self is always subject to loss, and can never stop the activity of being itself.³⁵ Because the West is perpetually in the process of refashioning itself, there is always the possibility that the self will be lost, and that the change will not constitute progress but rather regress. The superiority of the West is then always in question, it is never established once and for all. Rather than understanding these opposing definitions of civilization as “easily reconcilable” by a narrative in which “individuals and societies

³⁵ Peggy Kamuf (2005) provides an extended discussion of the claiming of the self as one’s own and its implications for feminism in her chapter titled “Deconstruction and Feminism: A Repetition.”

are configured as steadily developing a more democratic, reasoned, and cosmopolitan bearing,” it is possible, by contrast, to read for the ways in which civilization deconstitutes itself (179). For in the *Vindication*, the precarious and unstable position of civilization is precisely where the argument for women’s rights inserts itself.

The *Vindication* continually oscillates back and forth between the definition of civilization as something that is proper to Europe, and that which constantly escapes its grasp. Mapped onto this tension, civilization is posed as both the desired end of progress, as well as the entity that is advancing towards this end. It is thus the name for that which is subject to loss, as well as the loss itself. In the opening chapter, Wollstonecraft immediately provides an evaluation of Europe’s precarious position: “The civilization of the bulk of the people of Europe is very partial; nay, it may be made a question, whether they have acquired any virtues in exchange for innocence, equivalent to the misery produced by the vices that have been plastered over unsightly ignorance, and the freedom that has been bartered for splendid slavery” (96). Here the demand for rights is expressed by calling into question the civilizational status of Europe. The political claim for rights, and their extension to women, is rendered legible through the threat of Europe’s demise. As a result, rights are invoked to secure the ground of Europe’s identity, that is, to “give substance” to the distinctiveness of the self.³⁶ It is possible to suggest, then, that the hierarchy implicit within the concept of civilization provides the legitimating foundation for women’s rights. Although Europe is aligned with ignorance and slavery, the details of the text continually reassert its position as the culminating point of reason’s trajectory. In this symptomatic example, civilization qualifies the abstract woman and functions as the proper name of Europe: “Civilized women are, therefore, so weakened by false refinement that...their condition is much below what it would be were they left in a state nearer to nature” (157). Women may find themselves below the state of nature, but their civilizational status remains unchallenged. The “perfection of man” towards which progress reaches but never grasps is also and at once the name of the social to whom civilization inherently (and uniquely) belongs.

In her opening letter to M. Talleyrand-Perigord, the French bishop who defended free national education for boys, Wollstonecraft offers one of her most concise

³⁶ This is why recognition of the universality of natural rights on the part of others confirms Europe’s identity, rather than challenges its exceptional status.

articulations of the implications of women's condition: "Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its knowledge on general practice" (82). Linking women's rights to progress, the argument casts woman as a subject that poses a threat to the common, later given the name 'society' and 'civilization.' If truth is that which is in common, it is also that which defines the common. As a result, truth is conceived as the marker of absolute difference; it delineates the contours of a society constituted by sameness, a society capable of representing this agreed-upon truth to itself.³⁷ Woman signifies the threat of a regress that must be disciplined and contained to secure the identity of the civilized human: "woman [must be] placed in a station where she would advance, instead of retarding, the progress of these glorious principles that give substance to morality" (81). The defense of women's equality is thus not made on behalf of women as such, but rather in the aim of rescuing society from self-destruction. Furthermore, the appeal to a common destiny, while seemingly democratic in its aim towards full inclusion, carries within it a particular description of the human and prescribes the reform of those that deviate from this norm.

The invoking of a collective fate, a fate that supplies the *Vindication* with its justificatory impulse, relies upon an understanding of man that is tied to the logic of number. For society to be imagined in this way, man must substitute for one another. This presumption of an underlying sameness is based upon a *measured* comparison. Of particular interest for the development of this point, De Man focuses on a parable in *Essay on the Origin of Language* that narrates how the concept "man" came into being. In this narrative, the primitive man who meets other men for the first time experiences fright and gives them the name "giant." After discovering that "the supposed giants are neither larger nor stronger than himself and that their stature did not correspond to the idea he had originally linked to the word giant," primitive man invents the word "man" (quoted in de Man 1979: 149). As de Man suggests, the word "man" arises out of a "quantitative process of comparison based on measurement" that suppresses difference

³⁷ This ideal of community as "immediately present to itself, without difference" is one that, as Derrida (1998) points out, Rousseau nostalgically posits as preceding the degradation brought about by progress (136).

(154). The logic of number creates the identity “man” by privileging sameness over difference (which here actually precedes identity, rather than coming after the fact). It is the invention of the word “man,” then, that makes society possible by taking this numerical sameness for granted, or in de Man’s words, as a literal fact (155). As such, number is taken to be a “literal property of things that truly belongs to them” (154). The sameness provided by number folds inequality and difference into a society of equality, populated by “men.” Society therefore establishes itself upon an idea of man whose presumed unity is seen to reside prior to language or representation. This fundamentally quantitative understanding of man makes possible the concept of abstract equality that is so central to liberalism. As Rousseau’s parable demonstrates, the positing of a shared identity is achieved through a process of relating the difference of the other back to the self. In this process, it is the sameness of strength and stature that is privileged over the recognition of difference. The self is thus the origin of the human, and that which is in common with others (strength and stature) confirms a shared identity.

This concept of society as a collective of men is premised upon the suppression of woman at several levels. First, man operates as the “standard of the same,” to use Wendy Brown’s phrase, and therefore the “woman question” can only be posed in terms of if or how she can be the same as man. In addition, society itself is defined in difference from woman, whose fallen state confirms the core values of the collective. An argument for women’s rights that operates within these terms translates the difference of woman into a problem of inequality with sameness as its antidote. Framed within the logic of sameness and difference, the *Vindication* argues that women’s inequality must be corrected because her condition not only effects, but explicitly determines the state of society. Women’s rights are consequently figured as an instrument for the achievement of larger, *societal*, goals: namely, progress, knowledge, or civilization. As a result, the question of what will become of woman is pushed to the margins, and the focus is placed on the threat posed by her degradation:

“Women, as well as despots, have now, perhaps, more power than they would if the world, divided and subdivided into kingdoms and families, were governed by laws deduced from the exercise of reason...but in obtaining it...their character is degraded, and licentiousness spread through the whole aggregate of society. The many become pedestal to the few. I, therefore, will venture to assert, that till women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge must receive continual checks.” (130)

The improvement of women's condition is here the sticking point for the achievement of more universal aims, and as a result, interventions are rationalized based upon women's presumed lack. Even more than an obstacle to progress, woman's character is a disease that propagates through society, transforming everything that it infects into an image of itself. The danger that is invoked in this passage is nothing less than woman, in the guise of an authoritarian tyrant, subjecting society to the achievement of her own ends.

Conceiving of women's rights as instruments for maximizing the welfare of society forecloses a challenge to the structures and meanings that cause women's exclusion in the first place, but more significantly, also points to a broader understanding of politics that is at work within liberalism. In her book *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, Linda Zerilli draws attention to the larger frames in which political claims to freedom have been expressed and heard. Her point is that the continual focus on the tension between equality and difference within feminist political scholarship has missed how the appeal for women's rights is constructed and legitimated. In particular, she suggests that Wollstonecraft marks the beginning of a long history of justifying women's equality in terms of its contribution to the betterment of society. Within this framing, the social is assumed to have a pre-given reality prior to its representation, and politics is figured as an intervention into the social. While Zerilli is focused on drawing out the imaginings of freedom that are foreclosed when society functions as the horizon for justice, the *Vindication* raises the question of how "betterment" itself has been conceived. In this text, "betterment" is the movement of an entity (named society) towards the endpoint of civilization, a movement that is measured in relation to the relative position of others. The claim for women's rights is not simply articulated as a political intervention for the good of society, as Zerilli leaves it, but rather as necessary for the perfection of man, the fulfillment of reason, and the attainment of truth. To follow the argument of this chapter, the meaning of perfection is completely inseparable from the difference of race. In Wollstonecraft's treatise, then, the social frame takes civilization as its unit of measure, and hence the social is also the civilizational. This suggests that the model of politics as an intervention for the improvement of society is linked to an understanding of man that posits difference as inequality. The logic of "betterment" in Wollstonecraft's treatise demands that the deviant (woman) be conformed to the normative subject, that is, for difference to become assimilated. And furthermore,

justifying political power in the name of “betterment,” as Uday Singh Mehta³⁸ points out, carries within it an impulse to reform the world, and more specifically, to bring others in line with its vision of the future. The commitment to improvement, betterment, and perfection that characterizes the *Vindication* is thus inseparably enmeshed with the understanding of the political that impels empire.

At the same time that the incorporation of woman into the rational fabric of society is posed as the necessary prerequisite for civilization, this incorporation cannot be fully conceptualized by the text. In the terms of Wollstonecraft’s narrative, sexual difference will either be substantiated as the product of nature, or exposed as the sign of civilization’s failure: “...I have sighed when obliged to confess that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial” (89).³⁹ But in either case, woman is not granted a position within civilization. Unlike man, who is both sovereign of nature and belongs to nature, woman has no place within the nature/civilization binary. As the text frantically seeks to secure a position for her, the structure of this opposition increasingly spins out of control. Displaced from the domain of nature that fixes her essence as inferiority (Rousseau’s formulation), woman is positioned as the excess of civilization: “[women] are thrown out of a useful station by the unnatural distinctions established in civilized life” (111). But as the source of corruption, civilized life cannot provide woman with reason, and so it is nature that must be consulted: “[women] must return to nature and equality, if they wish to secure the placid satisfaction that unsophisticated affections impart” (107). Thus woman is beholden to nature once more. Shuttling back and forth between nature and civilization, woman reveals the mobility, the play of meaning, within this foundational opposition. Because woman has no stable terrain to retreat to, her movement between these terms interrupts their staging as opposing poles with no common ground. Woman functions as the sign of the irrationality lurking within the boundaries of civilization, a difference that is not simply the leftover remnants of nature carried into society, as Rousseau might have it. Rather, woman makes civilization differ from itself, for she belongs but is not proper to it. Civilization is at once the principle that woman has violated, and that which, in deviating from its own ends, has produced the

³⁸ See the chapter titled “Progress, Civilization and Consent” in *Liberalism and Empire*.

³⁹ The difference of woman is already foreclosed here, and relegated to the space between man and man.

difference that is woman.

Amidst the reshuffling of terms that accompanies the argument for women's rights, the figure of the savage provides a fixed ground upon which the concept of civilization can establish itself. In Rousseau's *Origins of Inequality*, savage man embodies the harmony and happiness of the state of nature, a state of prior freedom that has been traded for the subjection of civil society. As we have already seen, anthropological knowledge is indispensable to his argument, for empirical accounts of "contemporary" savages provide the window onto a state of nature that Rousseau characterizes early in his treatise as "a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, which probably never will exist, and about which it is nevertheless necessary to have precise notions in order to judge our present state correctly" (92). The visit to savage countries is "the most important voyage of all and the one that must be undertaken with the greatest care" because the savage best approximates this fictional state (213). The savage, in other words, literalizes the fiction that is the condition of possibility of civilization, as well as the ability to know the self. Throughout Rousseau's text, the intimacy between the savage and the animal marks civilized man's distance from his natural state.⁴⁰ As Pateman argues, women are not simply left behind in the state of nature, but are incorporated into the social contract through the distinction between the civil and the private sphere. In this sense, woman's position in "a sphere that both is and is not civil society" is also configured through the difference of the savage, a point that is lost in Pateman's analysis (11). To claim woman as a subject of civil society, the savage is called up to mark the depraved condition of women and hence the *unnaturalness* of women's inequality. As such, the savage's position outside of nature consolidates civilized man as a subject who follows the laws of nature. The treatment of polygamy provides an example of the ways in which nature is reclaimed for the self. Polygamy, a custom aligned with the savage, presents a problem because it is incommensurable to an equality premised upon sameness. Turning to Forster's treatment of polygamy in his *Account of the Isles of the South-Sea*, Wollstonecraft relates that the inhabitants of Africa give birth to more females than males because women have a "hotter constitution" as a

⁴⁰This association is made explicit in passages such as the following: "...the American savages could smell Spaniards on the trail as the best dogs could have done..." (113), and Rousseau speculates at length in a footnote that what early travelers took for animals might have been savage man (see page 205).

result of being deprived of the full share of her husband's attention (170). Being that in animals the hottest constitution determines the sex of the child, Forster attributes this inequality in the birth rate to the practice of polygamy itself. Hence polygamy begets polygamy. Although the slippage from the African to the animal is precisely what enables this account, the same move at once positions polygamy outside the realm of nature, a violation to the perfect balance between the sexes embodied by Europe. The savage thus occupies a position beyond nature, at the same time that his proximity to nature substantiates the fiction of the social contract.

What distinguishes the self from the other in Forster's account, then, is a commitment to equality premised upon the logic of number. Polygamy cannot be understood as equality because it violates the identity of the one, or to put it most simply, the assumption that one is equal to one. Equality rests upon an understanding of the individual as autonomous and indivisible, and most crucially, as self-identical and fully transparent to oneself. There is no possibility for multiple subjectivities or recognition that parts of the self may exceed the full grasp of consciousness within the formula of (one) man is equal to (one) woman. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft's denunciation of polygamy prescribes the form of a proper relationship as being between two individuals who are uniquely committed to one another, and hence willingly rescind their right to relations with others. As such, the contractual relationship that founds the heteronormative couple provides the model for the equality of woman with man. To put this more explicitly, equality is conceptually linked to heterosexuality, for it is within the structure of the heterosexual couple that the difference of woman is conceived as equivalent to man. And moreover, it is the self-evident indivisibility of the one that allows the heterosexual couple to stand as the embodiment of equality. The logic of number operates through taxonomy, that is, by classifying everything into categories of the same. As a result, the objects within a category are rendered equivalent by suppressing the differences between them.⁴¹ Although these are well-rehearsed insights, they are worth repeating because they illustrate the logic of numerical equality at work within the *Vindication*. For equality to be secured, all women must be the same, and women can only be woman. Rather than simply yoking together two preexisting

⁴¹ See especially Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

categories, the claim to equality *produces* the categories of “woman” and “man.” The second point to emphasize here is that woman’s equality to man is posed in terms of the wife’s equality to the husband. Amongst the many possible kinds of relationships between women and men, it is significant that marriage provides the frame for measuring equality. Woman continually substitutes for wife throughout the *Vindication*, and Wollstonecraft’s examples overwhelmingly draw upon her subordinate position within the nuclear family, as in the following: “...the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practicing various virtues, become the friend, and not the dependent of her husband...(117).” Forster’s account of polygamy is therefore crucial for establishing the wife’s friendship with her husband as the definition of equality. Polygamy provides the model for inequality, and in so doing, reaffirms the heteronormative couple as the fulfillment of (a measured) equality.

While the savage and the barbaric refer to the difference of civilization, a difference that is sometimes posed temporally and other times beyond the scope of the human entirely, the status of a larger group of racial Others is more ambiguous. In particular, Islam stands as the embodiment of women’s absolute subjection, and is called upon to validate Wollstonecraft’s assessment of the state of gender relations. By the second paragraph of the introduction, the specter of the oppressed Muslim woman makes its appearance: “in the true style of Mahometanism, [women] are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species, when improveable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural scepter in a feeble hand” (90). The Muslim woman appears as an allegory for women’s inequality, as a casual object of thought to return to Spivak’s phrase, and not as a site of oppression that the *Vindication* is concerned with rectifying. In this sense, the Muslim woman does not first emerge within liberal feminism as an object of empathy, but rather as the sign for an alterity that civilized woman must be rescued from. Relegated to the same category as the “brute creation,” the Muslim is not only excluded from reason, but the human-as-species altogether. The consolidation of woman as the subject of oppression therefore relies upon the difference of the Muslim woman. As the signifier for a necessary and uncontested state of victimization, this figure provides a stable ground on which to build the case for European women’s reform. One way of reading this passage is to conclude that the liberal argument for women’s equality was

never a truly inclusive one, but specifically identified white European women as subjects fit and deserving of belonging to rational humanity, while leaving unquestioned the exclusionary logics circumscribing such a humanity. But there is another argument to be made here, one that more profoundly challenges the ways in which equality has been endowed with meaning. What equality means for Wollstonecraft is that which the Muslim is incapable of conceiving, and as such, the concept of women's equality gains meaning in relation to a difference that is placed outside the limits of equality's reach. Posing the problem in this way suggests that an attention to difference cannot stop at specifying the particular inflexions of Wollstonecraft's subject—as white, heterosexual, wealthy, European woman, but must rather challenge the presumption that each of these categories demarcate a self-identical homogenous field. For example, what this reading might suggest is that the difference within “Europe” (or that which deviates from the ideal of civilization) is transposed onto the Muslim, thereby covering over the lack of an originary identity. Invoking Islam's inherent and uncritical support of sexual subordination works to reaffirm the proper identity of Europe as free from inequality. As such, it is the “true style” of Islam to oppress women, and not that of (a civilized) Europe. In treating women as subordinate, then, Europe has not been true to itself, but has taken the form of Islam. The natural and innate sexism of Islam opens up (European) woman's capacity for salvation, for the self is redeemed by the fact that its patriarchy is not endemic, or foundational to its principles. As such, the possibility that woman is not indelibly marked by her subordination is ultimately secured by recourse to the violated Muslim woman.

The preoccupation with the oppressed Muslim woman, who is never explicitly named, further suggests that the question of women's equality is centrally implicated in delineating the self from the other. As a presence that hovers over the text, this figure marks the urgency of correcting the wrong of sexual inequality by embodying the danger of failing to labor for the advancement of civilization. The claim to sameness that underpins the ideal of a rational humanity thus reaches its limit at the horizon of race. If woman is understood as a site of meaning not reducible to sexual difference, and hence simply opposed to man, it then becomes possible to think “woman” as a concept that organizes racial difference. Women are “weak beings...only fit for a seraglio” (93), “like Turkish bashaws, [who] have more real power than their masters” (130), are “cramped

with worse than Chinese bands” (132), “educated...in worse than Egyptian bondage” (230), and “must ever languish like exotics” (127). The semblance of Europe as a self-enclosed entity is founded upon difference, represented through this shifting catalogue of racial others. To understand these figures as part of the text’s historical “context” misses their significance to the operation of the argument, an assumption that has allowed Wollstonecraft scholars to cordon off the insistent naming of otherness as the signpost of another era. The structure of the comparison through which racial difference makes its way into Wollstonecraft’s argument brings into view what has been expelled from her definition of the human. Put simply, condemning women’s position on the grounds of their similarity to the Chinese, the Turkish, or the Muslim places the latter in a terrain resolutely outside the redemptive powers of reason. But even more significantly, the self-evident difference of these figures provides the unifying ground to “woman,” for what women have in common is their closeness to a lower scale of humanity, a closeness that paradoxically assures their distinctiveness. As a result, woman appears solely within the frame of Europe, and the Other woman disappears into the fabric of a generalized category of difference. This is why, though central to the argument, the Muslim woman cannot be named.

As this reading suggests, for woman to be inserted into the category of the rational individual, the text requires a figure that is inferior in its very essence, and for whom the denial of rights is a property of their being. In contrast to Riley’s opening framework, tracing the shifting category of “women” reveals that race is constantly produced in the effort to ground the rational subject and give meaning to the concept of equality. Racial difference does not therefore have its own, autonomous lineage that can be traced independently from sexual difference, but appears only in discontinuous fragments that cannot be recuperated into a coherent trail. The constant substitution of figures (from the Muslim to the Chinese to the Turk) marks the frantic attempt to anchor the identity of the self unhinged by woman’s appearance under the sign of reason. The specific difference assigned to these figures are simply “throwaway names,” to use Spivak’s term, and therefore the task at hand is not to offer up a more inclusive definition of the human that can gather up what has been excluded. Indeed, the promise of a unified humanity that will find its fulfillment in the future remains within the structure of progress that produces such exclusion in the first place. Furthermore, responding with a

call for inclusion takes for granted that these names refer to a difference that exists prior to their naming, and hence correspond with an empirical reality. The purpose of drawing attention to the claims made about the excesses of Islam, in particular, is to read for how difference founds the claim for equality, and to trace the ways in which woman's ascension to the fully human hinges upon the reification of the other's barbarity. In this sense, Islam might be understood as the name for that which the universalizing logic of reason must expel from itself. But what, in particular, is being expelled? In the following passage, Islam is linked through a chain of associations to the cultivation of femininity: "...when [Milton] tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls..." (104).⁴² Wollstonecraft's rebuttal of Milton can be reduced to the following: femininity is wrong because, like Islam, it supports women's oppression. There is no further elaboration of the link between femininity and women's subjugation, and hence it is the work of Islam to suture together the two claims. Islam requires no other explanation; it provides instant closure to a logic that has the capacity to go on *ad finitum*: the subjection of women is wrong because femininity is wrong because irrationality is wrong because inequality is wrong because Islam is wrong. After Islam, no more needs to be said; it is the final point of consensus that unites Europe in the face of inner conflict.

The foisting of femininity onto Islam places it within the realm of the (rationally) incomprehensible, and thereby marks it as that which cannot be thought within the terms of Wollstonecraft's argument. Within the order of reason, the desire for (and *to be*) woman has to be constantly foreclosed because such a desire undermines the march towards the full realization of man. Calling up the end of a perfected humanity, the *Vindication* resolves the problem of sexual difference by simply doing away with it altogether. In the approaching future, the rational individual will engulf woman and purge all difference from its horizon. This desire for resolution is premised upon a denial of meaning and has a long trajectory within feminism, finding its culmination in the collapsing of gender liberation with a world populated by gender indeterminate beings.

⁴² By the next sentence, the collapse of the Muslim woman with the animal is complete: "How grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes!" (105). Again, these relations emerge from the margins of the text.

In a frame that cannot sustain the desire for woman, Islam stands for the threat posed by reason's inability to render sexual difference meaningless. The figures of difference that provide the analogy for women's oppression thus mark the ways in which woman continues to mean, despite all attempts to discipline, assimilate, and contain her. The anxiety that is transferred onto the other is that meaning persists, even after woman has submitted herself to the principle of reason. Such a threat is managed by tying femininity to racial difference: "In a seraglio, I grant that all these arts [that make woman appear pleasing to man] are necessary; the epicure must have his palate tickled, or he will sink into apathy; but have women so little ambition as to be satisfied with such a condition?" (117). The cultivation of femininity is (once again) relegated to the domain of polygamy, and the meaning of equality is secured in opposition to the institutionalization of sexual difference embodied by the harem. But it seems that the emphasis on a specific character and appearance, what I am here naming as femininity, is less the problem than the fact that woman can only be defined in relation to man. This is the paradox that the *Vindication* cannot get rid of, even as it works to carve out the possibility of women's independence, and that is managed by rendering this relationality into the condition of the other. In the end, woman is constrained to categories which are necessarily derivative of man: "The conclusion that I wish to draw, is obvious; make women into rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives, and mothers; that is—if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers" (311). Within the logic of her own argument, however, the wife and mother cannot by definition be equal to the husband and father.

Solving the Problem of Woman Through Education

To pause and review the argument up to this point, the condition of women demands attention, according to the *Vindication*, because the status of civilization and the ambitions of a collective humanity are at stake. This threat is rendered meaningful by suturing women's subordination to racial difference. Through the persistent alignment of inequality with the barbarism of the other, the text collapses the question of women's rights into one of racial progress. The danger posed by woman is represented as the encroachment of racial difference into the contours of the self, and as a result, women's

equality is figured as a campaign to maintain the purity and integrity of whiteness (given the name “Europe”). In a treatise that comes well before the pronounced racial divisions of the suffrage movement, it is already possible to trace how the radical project of exposing the contradictions within Enlightenment universals (and more specifically, Enlightenment rationality) takes place through the reaffirmation of a racial hierarchy. As discussed earlier, Wollstonecraft concedes that woman cannot be incorporated into rational humanity in her current state; she must first be reformed. At this juncture, the *Vindication* turns to education as the solution to mending woman’s penchant for unreason. As the final answer to the problems it has set forth, education is charged with the responsibility to unlock the universal capacity for reason that is peculiar to the human.

The injustice of women’s subordination, according to this ending, can be abolished once and for all by eliminating the obstacles that preclude access to a complete education. The entrenched and systemic forms of power that are gestured to in other parts of the *Vindication* are submerged to make way for a completely individualizing view of social relations. Through education, the individual will be lifted out of their ignorance and made into a productive member of society. Wollstonecraft’s struggle against the various ways in which women have been defined and her nuanced analysis of the systems that hold those definitions in place fall out of the picture entirely, and the problem is reduced to straight-forwardly causal relationship: women’s lack of education is the root cause of her inequality, and the solution is to make education available to her. Anchored in the absolute distinction between truth and deception, enlightenment and ignorance, as well as freedom and subjection, education promises to shepherd the irrational to reason. The concept of education provides the connecting bridge between these opposing terms, and makes it possible to think of them as discrete stages that the individual (and hence society) moves through. The individual’s progress towards enlightenment thus stands in as the path towards women’s equality. Built on the assumption that women are incapable of reason, Wollstonecraft contends that the current system of education has lost sight of its larger purpose:

Into this error men have, probably, been led by viewing education in a false light; not considering it as the first step to form a being advancing gradually towards perfection, but only as a preparation for life. On this sensual error, for I must call it so, has the false system of female manners been reared, which robs the whole

sex of its dignity, and classes the brown and fair with the smiling flowers that only adorn the land. This have ever been the language of men, and the fear of departing from a supposed sexual character, has made even women of superior sense adopt the same sentiments. Thus understanding, strictly speaking, has been denied to woman; and instinct, sublimated into wit and cunning, for the purposes of life, has been substituted in its stead. (147)

Linking female education to the production of feminine subjects, this passage works to disarticulate the ends of education from sexual difference. Narrowly understood as a “preparation for life,” Wollstonecraft argues that education has wrongfully focused on the individual’s ability to succeed in society rather than striving towards the achievement of perfection. According to this reframing, there can only be a single end to education, and that is the fulfillment of humanity. In this seemingly minor revision, the subject of education is recast as a point on the scale of man, thereby linking the fate of the individual with that of humanity writ large. As a result, education is reconceived as the motor of progress, whose primary objective is to act upon the inferior and render them equal. Suddenly, to be uneducated is not merely to be “unprepared” but rather to occupy the category of the less-than-human. In short, the idea of education as focused on “perfection,” the very idea that circulates as the solution to women’s inequality in the *Vindication*, carries implicit within it the model of a descending scale of humanity and the moral responsibility to elevate the inferior.

Taking for granted that there is a substance to femininity (or in Wollstonecraft’s words, that there is such a thing as “sexual character”), the existing model of education disperses knowledge in accordance with a pre-established definition of sexual difference and thus can only reaffirm that which it has already assumed to be true. This error at the heart of the educational system leads women to remain in a position of stasis, fulfilling a primarily aesthetic role in society. With a proper education, however, the subject consumed by the trappings of femininity will be remade into one that reaches towards a common end (“perfection”). What counts as a productive and valuable life turns upon the coupling of man with understanding and woman with instinct. To simply “adorn the land,” as women do, is to be governed by instinct (which is aligned with nature) and hence not contribute to the advancement of society.⁴³ Education promises to get rid of

⁴³ At other moments, however, education is charged with bringing women back to nature: “. . .the whole tenor of female education (the education of society) tends to render the best disposed romantic and inconstant; and the remainder vain and mean. In the present state of society this evil can be scarcely remedied, I am afraid, in the slightest degree; should a more laudable ambition ever gain ground they may

this excess by uniformly molding students into copies of the same. As reformed subjects, Wollstonecraft promises, women will recognize the irrationality of their present interests and desires, and forsake them in the name of a perfected humanity. This is nothing less than the dream for consensus over the ends of man. From a national education will emerge a new population that is in agreement regarding what constitutes the perfection of itself. Contained within these lines, then, is nothing less than the call to eliminate that which diverges from the promise of a self-identical humanity. Feminism's close relationship with eugenics, associated most decisively with the turn of the twentieth century, thus carries a much longer trail.

As Wollstonecraft details her plan for national public education, the exclusions that necessarily accompany the production of a universal subject come to the fore. After expounding on the importance of erasing educational distinctions based upon sexual difference, the logic of separate spheres dictates her organization of the curriculum: "After the age of nine... the two sexes being still together in the morning; but in the afternoon, the girls should attend a school, where plain-work, mantua-making, millinery, &c. would be their employment. The young people of superior abilities, or fortune, might now be taught, in another school, the dead and living languages, the elements of science, and continue the study of history and politics, on a more extensive scale... (298)." A distinct social hierarchy is thus retained within the move to extend equal educational opportunities to all. What is significant about this account is not merely its glaring contradiction with the ideal of the self-made individual, for to leave it at that only suggests Wollstonecraft's inability to detect the illogic of her own argument, but rather what is more interesting to dwell upon is the ways in which the naturalness of class and sexual difference get recuperated as organizing principles. The fixed relation between particular forms of knowledge and class or sexual difference, or perhaps more succinctly, the assumption that only certain people are suited for thinking, reflects how the logic of taxonomy is built into an educational model premised upon the redemption of the inferior. Although Wollstonecraft's universalizing view of education seeks to fold the previously excluded into the fabric of the same humanity, it becomes increasingly evident that such a humanity is carved up into categories of difference that are indelibly inscribed be brought nearer to nature and reason, and become more virtuous and useful as they grow more respectable (268)." The difficulty of pinning woman down unravels the distinction between ignorance and understanding, the very distinction that renders the project of education coherent.

on its subjects. While the human capacity for rationality secures the same education for all, the subject marked with a difference cannot ultimately be disentangled from the sign of sexual difference or social rank that precedes their status as “student.” This model of education is not blind to difference, then, but reaffirms and solidifies a hierarchical order premised, if not explicitly upon the logic of birthright, then at least upon a scale of natural intelligence. The burden of difference determines one’s place in the future, and the autonomous and unencumbered individual who is free to maximize his potential is revealed to be classed and gendered at its very core.

As Wollstonecraft attempts to describe the future that a rational education will bring into being, she cannot escape the unrelenting problem of sexual difference. Rather than having been neatly resolved through the logic of reason, the difference of woman appears ever more difficult to discipline and manage. In the end, marriage is reclaimed as the underlying ground that guarantees women’s equality, pushing out and supplanting reason altogether:

if marriage be the cement of society, mankind should all be educated after the same model, or the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship, nor will women ever fulfil the peculiar duties of their sex, till they become enlightened citizens, till they become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men; in the same manner, I mean, to prevent misconstruction, as one man is independent of another.” (293).

The rifts within this sentence reveal the struggle to contain the full implications of her argument. Although access to an equal education should, according to this logic, effectively render sexual difference irrelevant, Wollstonecraft frantically works to recuperate the distinctiveness of woman’s role. This leads to the incongruous claim that an equal education will prepare women for the particular responsibilities associated with her sex, a claim that violates the universality of the rational individual that she has been arguing for all along. According to this passage, an educational model that overlooks sexual difference will nevertheless produce sharply differentiated subjects. Woman is thus marked by an intractable difference that resists the operation of reason, destining her to remain an always incomplete version of man. In this elaboration of the end of education, the fundamental tension between woman as a fact of nature (to which heterosexuality bears witness) and woman as the unique product of social norms (the ground for her entry into reason) around which the entire text has circled is made explicit. The naturalness of heterosexuality, expressed through the naming of marriage as that

which precedes equality, is called upon to recover a unifying ground to woman. Woman is always already wife (and hence mother), and this designation follows her into the abstracted category of the student. The dangerous drive of education to remake everything into the Same comes to a grinding halt, for heterosexuality secures the fact that sexual difference will be retained and reproduced within an equality of sameness.

As the ruthlessly individualizing logic of education goes, once knowledge is made available there is nothing that stands in the way of women becoming “enlightened citizens” free to “earn their own subsistence.” In this respect, the democratization of education advocated by Wollstonecraft carries within it new forms of authorizing women’s inferiority. It is now the unique burden of individual women to prove themselves worthy of the humanity bestowed upon them. By contrast, women’s current state of oppression places her outside the realm of intentionality because she is not in full possession of herself: “Educated in the enervating style recommended by the writers on whom I have been animadverting; and not having a chance, from their subordinate state of society, to recover their lost ground, is it surprising that women everywhere appear a defect in nature (228)?” Women’s incongruity with nature (typified as a preoccupation with pleasure, a tendency for jealousy, and an inward focus on the self, as we have seen elsewhere) is not her own doing, but rather what education made her to be. As a liberated subject, however, woman will be blameworthy: “Let women share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated, or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty. If the latter, it will be expedient to open a fresh trade with Russia for whips...(332).” The gift of equality is again quite explicitly contingent upon women’s reform. Although the sarcasm of Wollstonecraft’s tone should not be overlooked, the justification of violence against those who fail is nevertheless the logical outcome of her argument. The irrational subject, as we have seen throughout this text, does not deserve the rights deemed essential to humanity.⁴⁴ As this ominous challenge suggests, it will be woman’s responsibility to close the distance between herself and man, and to provide substance to the inchoate demand to “grow more perfect.” This undertaking can only fail, for in addition to the inherently masculinist constitution of reason, the meaning of perfection is also articulated in terms

⁴⁴ And, once again, the connection between racial difference and women’s subjection is reaffirmed. However, the violence practiced by the self, unlike Russia, would be justified by reason.

of distance from woman. Once the gates of education are opened, any sympathy that existed previously is supplanted by the burdens of the self-responsible individual, for whom failure signals a lack of intelligence and discipline, or simply inherent backwardness. These passages thus gesture towards the new modes of subjection that arise from the extension of equality to those previously regarded as inadequate or lesser versions of humanity. After access to universal rights and their attendant resources has been granted, it is entirely up to the individual to remake themselves into models of the Enlightenment human. As such, the burden of overhauling the structure of sexual inequality is placed squarely and exclusively on the shoulders of women. The subject that accompanies Wollstonecraft's vision of education is the responsible, willful agent divorced from the inequalities of the past, extricated from relations of power, and suddenly thrust into a position of culpability.⁴⁵

If the full potential of woman is yet to reveal itself, then, education is the catalyst that propels the present into the truth of the future. The optimism that so many scholars have attributed to Wollstonecraft refers to her seemingly unqualified faith in the inevitability of reform, crystallized in the image of a future that will solve the conflicts of the past and present: "Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally: a crowd of authors that all *is* now right: and I, that all will be right" (99). But what others have labeled as the sign of Wollstonecraft's innocence and hopeful naïveté can more productively be read for how the future is conceptualized in this argument. The future, when "all will be right," provides reassurance that the chaos of meaning surrounding sexual difference will find its ultimate resolution. Stressing the unknowability of woman in the present, Wollstonecraft continually pleads that she not be judged in her current state: "let their faculties have room to unfold, and their virtues gain strength, and then determine where the whole sex must stand on the intellectual scale" (124). This statement places woman beyond the grasp of empiricism, for her truth cannot be accessed

⁴⁵ These insights borrow heavily from Saidiya Hartman's work (1997) on the varied ways in which emancipation produced new forms of subjection for the slave. Tracing the intimate and inseparable relationship between slavery and freedom, Hartman emphasizes the centrality of responsibility in reconstituting the newly freed into accountable and indebted subjects, thus paving the way for the system of debt peonage. The same logic of needing to prove oneself worthy of equality is operative in both instances. This is not to conflate the condition of slavery with white women's oppression (as too many feminists have done) but rather to demonstrate the broader way that liberalism links freedom to the self-responsible individual, producing new modes of enslavement in its wake.

or represented. Not even woman knows herself; as such, she can only deceive.⁴⁶ By contrast, the truth of man is transparent, and the visible corresponds with the real. If woman opens up the question of what it means to know, the promise of undisputed truth is recuperated as the inevitable outcome of the present. In the future, all will be as it appears.

By way of conclusion, what, ultimately, is the significance of Wollstonecraft's reliance on the future as a necessary category for conceiving equality? And furthermore, what kind of a future is posited by this diagnosis of women's exclusion? In contending that the truth of woman has been misidentified, the *Vindication* poses women's subordination as an error that can be corrected with more accurate knowledge. This understanding of the problem and its solution, as Peggy Kamuf argues in a short piece titled "Replacing Feminist Criticism," is symptomatic of the way feminism has conceived of the "order of women's exclusion." A consideration of Kamuf's argument provides some final thoughts about the implications of deferring woman into the future. Feminist critique, she suggests, has pursued two distinct ends to expose how "man" does not operate as an empty referent for humanity: demanding the inclusion of the excluded and claiming a specific feminine knowledge. Although presented as opposing strategies, Kamuf argues that they rely upon the same understanding of women's exclusion and commitment to correctly defining the object. But, as she poses, "...what if notions such as 'getting-at-the-truth-of-the-object' represented a principal means by which the power of power structures are sustained and even extended" (44)? In other words, the positing of 'woman' as an object of thought that is discrete and circumscribable, and hence can be accounted for, reaffirms the centrality of the self-representing human. This understanding of the human, moreover, is precisely the one responsible for excluding women in the first

⁴⁶ Riley suggests that in the seventeenth century, the emphasis on unknowability is a common response to women's increasing alignment with the natural order and the subsequent sexualization of the self. For example, Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle argued that "we are as ignorant of our selves, as men are of us" (cited in Riley, 30). She argues that at this moment the soul's relationship to sexual difference was still being struggled over, while by the end of the eighteenth century the consolidation of woman as a subject completely saturated by her sex was complete. Riley recognizes the conceptual relation between woman and the future, but locates its emergence within the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. She writes, "it is as if 'women', who have been erroneously or ignorantly represented, might yet, reconstructed, come into their own...[addresses on the Woman Question] are caught up not in being, where they are massively misunderstood, but in becoming" (47). However, the preoccupation with becoming is clearly present a century before, where the category of the future is indispensable to a feminist argument premised upon the neutrality of reason.

place. The call made by Wollstonecraft to wait before “determin[ing] where the whole sex must stand on the intellectual scale” carries the presumption that woman’s truth lies concealed beneath what is visible, and that the future can provide access to such truth. This suggests, then, that the consolidation of woman as a subject of rights is tied to the promise of unveiling her truth.

The argument for women’s rights presented by the *Vindication* is thus bound together by the potential for, in the words of Kamuf, a totalizing reference to the object. The condition of women is attributed to an empirical error, that is, the wrong diagnosis of her capacity for rationality, and corrected with an appeal for further empiricism. It is for this reason that women’s exclusion is legible through an account of her inferiority, and that observations of women’s (irrational) behavior offer proof of such exclusion. As a result, the identification of women’s exclusion from the order of the rational individual demands a misogynist description of woman in the present. Furthermore, the relationship to the future articulated in this model of woman as yet-to-be-determined carries a prescription within it, for the *Vindication*’s orientation towards the future is not merely an embracing of the unknown, but rather an articulation of which subjects are fit to belong to and populate such a future. Meanwhile, woman is fated to inferiority: “...I have been led to imagine that the few extraordinary women who have rushed in eccentric directions out of the orbit prescribed to their sex, were male spirits, confined by mistake in female frames” (124). Such tensions reveal that woman is a difference that cannot be disciplined and absorbed into the neutrality of reason, and hence can only be conceptualized through the structure of the deferral. Woman is still becoming, currently unknown, “not yet” rational. Ultimately, then, Wollstonecraft’s treatise can only be an argument for woman that is about to be, a woman that resides in the perpetual future, and more precisely, a woman that has lost all traces of woman. To become a rational subject, difference must be eliminated, and women must shed all that which constitutes them as ‘woman.’ Wollstonecraft’s treatise conceives of a future where reason will be totalized, which is nothing less than calling for the eradication of woman altogether. This is the ultimate misogyny of the *Vindication*, one that Susan Gubar diagnoses but cannot pursue to its end.

Throughout the course of this journey through Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, the definition of the human that accompanies the claim to women’s equality has been shown

to be bound together by reason and specified by race. The concept of civilization emerges as structurally necessary to the argument because the definition of the subject on which it is premised is tied to progress. Moreover, the notion of self-development that attaches to civilization provides the opening for woman to develop into a fully rational subject, and thereby contribute to the advancement of humanity. The hierarchy upon which Wollstonecraft builds her defense of woman cannot simply be brought down by admitting plurality into the structure of reason, a move that characterizes liberal multiculturalism's management of difference. Indeed, what this readings has worked to suggest is that woman's entry into the domain of the rational subject is built upon the subtle foreclosure of an other that is naturally fated to irrationality, and hence inequality. And yet, because the text cannot fully conceptualize rational woman without losing its moorings, she is expelled into the future, a future that is denied to the other. To know the truth of woman, whatever that might be, risks collapsing the whole architecture of the civilized human. The equality of sameness that Wollstonecraft bequeaths to feminism is thus inextricably configured through a descending scale of humanity. Rather than challenging the exclusions of universal reason, the demand for inclusion relies upon difference to mark the exterior. Woman is thus produced in tandem with racial others, or put more succinctly, woman only gains meaning through racial difference.

Although the paradoxes and contradictions plaguing the *Vindication* are well documented, these have (either implicitly or explicitly) been folded into an account of the past and attributed to Wollstonecraft's limited ability to conceptualize the machinery of sexual difference. In this sense, the narrative of "becoming" that forges woman's relationship to reason has also operated as the model for feminism's own relationship to its cardinal texts. As a result, the relationships of difference that constitute woman as a subject with the potential for reason have been too hastily relegated to a past whose limitations have been determined in advance. Within this framework, reading Wollstonecraft's text can only confirm what we already know about the role of the other in the production of the self, and the consequences of assuming the European as the norm for the human. The work of drawing apart the network of concepts that holds "woman" together, as this chapter has tried to suggest, is necessary to even conceive of what it would mean to shift the ground of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, and more importantly, to start the long work of dismantling feminism's complicity with racism.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Natural Rights: The Fight for Women’s Suffrage in the Name of “the Race”

The duo of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony occupy a mythic place in the history of feminism, not only because the right to vote stands in as the crowning achievement of feminist struggle, but also because the cause of women’s enfranchisement has long provided the interpretive frame for determining what counts as feminist politics. The framework of equal rights, in other words, provides a structure and order to the narrativizing of feminism, as well as a concrete set of criteria for determining the accomplishment of its aims. For this reason, the figures of Stanton and Anthony satisfy more than the desire to locate feminism within the bodies of identifiable heroines, for they also act as a fulcrum that provides a line of continuity between what preceded them and the future to come. At the risk of overstating their centrality, the significance accorded to Stanton and Anthony’s struggle provides feminism with both a past and a future, and in so doing, prescribes what issues and concerns fall under its purview. The long and persistent association of feminism with rights claims, in particular, relies upon Stanton and Anthony as its anchor. Following the work begun in the previous chapter, this engagement with Stanton’s work seeks to trace the ways in which “woman” is constituted as a viable member of the voting polity, and as a subject of equal rights more broadly. Out of the pair, Stanton was not only the most prolific, but her corpus of books, essays, speeches and newspaper editorials comprise a sustained effort to contend with the relationship between sexual difference and natural rights. Given that her political career stretched over fifty years, the volume of writing attributed to Stanton’s name is immense, and the arguments she made in support of women’s suffrage saw many different and contradictory incarnations. Notably, the scholarly attention to Stanton has shifted drastically in recent years, from a focus on her activism and role as a movement leader to her contributions as a significant intellectual thinker on questions relevant to political theory.⁴⁷ Unlike the previous glorification of her relentless dedication to the cause, this new body of work has confronted the escalating racism and xenophobia in her articulation of women’s suffrage, and turned to the surrounding social and political

⁴⁷ This shift is articulated by Ellen Carol DuBois and Richard Candida Smith as the project of their recently edited volume, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Feminist as Thinker* (2007).

context for explanation. Stanton and Anthony's decision to oppose the passage of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendment, which extended suffrage to black men, is often narrated as the culmination of this reactionary thread, and evidence of the strain faced by the movement.⁴⁸ The search for external stimuli as the cause of Stanton's unabashed denigration of racialized subjects, however, displaces attention away from how the question of women's rights is staged in her writings, and the network of meanings that give it significance. While the growing prominence of Darwin's evolutionary support for the "survival of the fittest," and the social discourses that gave rise to the passage of immigration acts (including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) and the Indian Allotment Act surely shaped the articulation of women's suffrage, the point is that the quest to locate the seeds of racism 'elsewhere' works to keep feminism as a mode of thought that is pure at its origin. Put differently, such an approach positions racism and excessive nationalism as ideologies that have infiltrated feminism, thereby sidestepping the ways in which the argument for women's rights has always relied upon and produced racial difference.

Sue Davis' recently published book titled *The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* provides a symptomatic example of how the question of racism within the lineage of feminism has been treated. The framework she offers warrants attention precisely because it explicitly positions itself as an engagement with Stanton's racial politics. Drawing upon Roger M. Smith's "Multiple-Traditions Thesis," Davis argues that American political thought is best understood as composed of multiple and conflicting traditions that individuals like Stanton brought together in strategic combinations. Intended as a challenge to the progress narrative, and as an acknowledgement that "American political culture has not invariably revolved around liberal democratic principles," Davis' study traces the operation of four separate

⁴⁸ In 1869, conflict over this issue led to a split in the woman's movement. Stanton and Anthony broke with the American Equal Rights Association, the existing national body, and formed the National Woman's Suffrage Association (NWSA) whose political platform explicitly opposed the passage of the fifteenth amendment. In opposition to their move, Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, along with other prominent abolitionists, formed the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) which supported the extension of the franchise to black men as a step towards women's enfranchisement. A historical discussion of the movement's division is provided by Judith Wellman (2004) as well as Sue Davis (2008). It is also worth noting Stanton and Anthony's close relationship with George Francis Train, who notoriously upheld notions of innate racial difference and defended the institution of slavery, continued long after the establishment of NWSA. In particular, Train provided the financial backing for their newspaper the *Revolution* (Mitchell 2007).

traditions and their interaction in Stanton's thought: liberalism, republicanism, ascriptivism and radicalism (10). Davis also offers this framework as a recognition that liberalism has never been a homogenous and all-pervasive theory, but has always been informed and shaped by strands of thought that "lie outside its boundaries" (10). Challenging this taxonomy is not to reassert liberalism as a totalizing category, but in fact to question the very ways in which such a division ends up reifying liberalism as a self-identical body of ideas that is intrinsically committed to egalitarianism. Under the heading of "ascriptivism" Davis places doctrines that assign natural and unchanging qualities to individuals based on their membership within groups (12). What is performed in the establishment of this taxonomy, then, is the displacement of sexual and racial difference to an altogether separate "tradition" of thought. As a result, race is evacuated from liberalism altogether, and posed as belonging to a way of thinking that is exterior to, rather than necessarily constitutive of, its principles. This treatment of "ascriptivism," moreover, assumes that racism is a self-regulating and bounded category of thought that can be confined to its own terrain, leaving liberalism and natural rights free from any such contamination. Hence statements such as the following become possible: "...[Stanton] combined the natural-right claim for universal suffrage with assertions of white women's superiority to black men and immigrants" (145). Ideas of racial hierarchy, in other words, are not proper to natural rights, but simply the byproduct of strategy. Indeed, Davis states this outright: "...arguments drawn solely from any single tradition could never have been sufficient to overcome the obstacles to reform. Thus, when her initial approach, which relied heavily on liberal principles, was repeatedly ridiculed, ignored or refuted, she shifted ground to construct a line of argument that was more likely to be effective" (26). In the end, racial ideologies are to be understood as only the natural outcome of political negotiations, the collateral damage to winning the fight for suffrage, as it were.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ As one of the sole texts explicitly focused on the racism of the suffrage movement, Barbara Andolsen's *Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks* (1986) performs the same recuperative gesture that ends up displacing the question of racism to the realm of strategy. At times a meticulous chronicling of the elitism, nativism and racism that coursed throughout the arguments for women's suffrage, Andolsen also defers to the logic of racism-as-collateral-damage: "In order to evaluate suffragists' tactics and arguments fairly, it is necessary to place them within the specific political context in which they were used. White suffragists resorted to tacit cooperation with segregation practices and to racist and nativist claims in part because Southern support was essential for ratification of a woman suffrage amendment to the federal constitution" (69). Once again, the appeal to the significance of "context" performs a disengagement from contending with the relationship between natural rights and racial difference by shifting the terms of the

In line with the focus on strategy, existing scholarship has largely broached the question of race in terms of the troubled relationship between women's suffrage and the abolition movement. As a result, the treatment of racial difference is confined to the ways in which discrete social movements either align or conflict with one another, with the focus placed on the fraught position occupied by women of color who have to locate their allegiances with either race or sex. Although a large body of feminist work has sought to explain the reasons behind these failures in coalition-building, the analysis stops at the declaration of loyalty to political platforms.⁵⁰ Stanton and Anthony's refusal to support the amendments relating to the enfranchisement of black men, and Stanton's later defense of linking educational requirements to suffrage, is thus lamented as a turn away from their earlier "radical abolitionist" stance (Andolsen 1). Indeed, Stanton's activism surrounding the abolitionist cause alongside her famed husband, Henry Cady Stanton, is rehearsed as proof that the intolerance she displayed later in life was the effect of a long and frustrated career of continual setbacks. Shifting the terms of the conversation away from both the individualist assessment of Stanton's psychology, as well as the sociological description of movement politics, offers the opening for apprehending race differently, that is, by delinking the study of race from its strict correspondence to the organization of bodies within the social field. Of course, this is not to suggest that one has no relation to the other, but rather to attend to how the suffrage argument consistently generated meanings surrounding racial difference to articulate its claims. Beginning from this premise raises an altogether different set of questions than Stanton's faithfulness to her political declarations. In particular, what narrative frames does Stanton employ to make sense of and to represent women's condition? On what grounds does she demand the right to vote, and what meanings are given to the ballot as a result? The trope of contamination, purity, and security through which women's suffrage is rendered legible as an object of political intervention articulates democratic representation as necessary in relation to these ends. Across Stanton's corpus, then, women's vote is defended in the name of a social at war for its own survival, a social that is given the name of "the race" while remaining firmly inscribed within the frame of civilization. Pursuing the implications of the interpretive matrices that surround women's

conversation to the moral standing of the white suffragist.

⁵⁰ For example: Christine Stansell (2007), Nancy Cott (1987), Linda Kerber (1998), Sara Evans (1989)

suffrage continues to challenge the assumption that the error committed by Stanton and Anthony's campaign was to exclude race, that is, to cast it outside the net of the enfranchised. Rather, this reading picks up from the previous chapter in attempting to trace how the claim to women's rights cannot do without racial difference, and constantly produces it as the other to woman.

Women's Suffrage as a Natural Right

If for Mary Wollstonecraft, women's position within the category of the individual provided her with access to reason, for Elizabeth Cady Stanton, it is through citizenship that women lay claim to equality. What it means to have rights and what constitutes the mark of their existence are thus the central questions that continuously confront Stanton's struggle for women's suffrage. Taking the law as her object, Stanton challenges the contradictions within a system whose legitimacy rests upon the promise of a totalizing universality, that is, the promise that the particularity of the subject can disappear without a trace into its abstract categories. On the one hand, her argument takes issue with the way in which sexual difference is assigned particular meaning within the law, for it is this particularity that excludes woman from the category of the voting subject. At the same time, however, Stanton also claims the irreducibility of sexual difference to make the argument that woman's representation cannot be folded under man, but must represent itself. Sexual difference is consequently figured as the source of woman's contribution to society, and the grounds for her admission into the category of the enfranchised. This tension, in parallel but altogether differently from Wollstonecraft, is negotiated through recourse to the intractable difference of race. Put otherwise, racial difference is the constitutive outside that secures the coherency of "woman" as viable citizen and equal member of the voting polity.

Underlying the many shifts and discontinuities that characterize Stanton's life-long defense of woman's suffrage, the organizing premise that women's exclusion constitutes the violation of an ordinary law remains her starting point. This argument inserts itself in the disjuncture between natural and civil rights, and more specifically, charges the law with failing to abide by nature's dictates. It is both the state and nature at once that are posed as the guarantor of women's rights, and yet these entities are also

constituted in opposition to one another. The state institutes and confers the rights dictated by nature, and in so doing, transforms them into civil rights. At the same time, civil rights emerge as an always incomplete and failed embodiment of natural rights, which are thus necessarily subject to revision and change in order to better approximate nature's truth. Given that the law takes nature as the source of its legitimacy, the split between natural and civil rights must be forgotten for the concept of rights to have authority. In other words, the law must masquerade as nature itself. The issue of women's suffrage makes visible this gap that is otherwise concealed by noting the difference between what is prescribed by nature and what is conferred by the law of the state. In the following passage, several significant tensions emerge in the struggle to locate the foundation of rights:

“If, then, the nation of a being decides its rights, every individual comes into this world with rights that are not transferable. He does not bring them like a pack on his back, that may be stolen from him, but they are a component part of himself, the laws which insure his growth and development. The individual may be put in the stocks, body and soul, he may be dwarfed, crippled, killed, but his rights no man can get; they live and die with him.” (Dubois 170)

Immediately, the conflicted position of rights as, on the one hand, determined by the nation, and on the other, guaranteed as a universal condition of being human comes to the foreground.⁵¹ While the nation “decides” the rights that are granted, they are also intimately lodged within the body, and figured as the source of the individual's most vital functions. In this sense, rights both precede any formal recognition, and yet are determined by it. The second tension concerns the benefits attached to rights, or put differently, the value associated with their conferral. As the paragraph proceeds, the very protection secured through the claim to rights is retracted, leaving only their sheer existence as the end in itself. Persisting in bondage, torture and death, rights prevail even within the conditions that stand for their ultimate renunciation. Through the course of the paragraph, then, what it means to have rights unravels entirely, for they cannot guard against the most severe violation of the individual, which is death itself. Lastly, the trace of the masculine pronoun in this passage demonstrates feminist political theory's central insight that woman carries the burden of proving an individuality that is from the outset already the property of man. The multiple rifts are exposed here mark the contours of

⁵¹ Or to invoke Hannah Arendt's terms, rights are cast as simultaneously prior to and yet dependent upon the nation. See “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man” (1973).

Stanton's struggle, a struggle that takes the form of relentlessly shifting positions, but lodges itself upon race. Contrary to other readings of Stanton's corpus, which situate the transformations and inconsistencies in her argument as necessary political negotiations, unfortunate casualties of an urgent political cause, this chapter argues that the exclusionary logics she deployed are on the contrary the very enabling condition of the argument for women's rights.

The claim that suffrage constitutes a natural right is an organizing pivot that runs throughout the breadth of Stanton's writings, bridging the rifts and perpetual shifts that have been well documented by scholars of her work.⁵² In a speech relevantly titled "Suffrage as a Natural Right," Stanton ties the ballot to the right to self-protection, a right that comes prior to the establishment of society. Invoked within the language of security and defense, the right to vote is explicitly narrated as a substitute for more primitive weapons: "In the inauguration of government, when men made compacts for mutual protection and surrendered the rude weapons used when each one was free lance, they did not surrender the natural right to protect themselves and their property by laws of their own making, they simply substituted the ballot for the bow and arrow" (V: 540).⁵³ To conceptualize the ballot as a weapon suggests that the right to vote, while posed as an expression of individual autonomy, is also and at once the sole means of protection against the violence of others. Stanton continues with this point, "Forbidden by law to settle one's own quarrels with the rude weapons of savage life, and denied their substitute in civilization, the position of the citizen is indeed helpless, with his rights of person and property solely at the mercy of others" (V: 541). In contrast to the savage who has access to the proper implements as well as the prerogative to use them, the citizen has been stripped of every defense and hence the possibility of safeguarding themselves. This loss of the weapon is mourned as a loss of self-determination, understood as the individual's ability to exert the force that underpins the "rights of person." Once the dominion of the self, the twin rights of person-and-property are relinquished to another with the advent of citizenship, a shift that is also coded as the difference between the savage and the civilized. The ballot stands for the possibility of autonomy within this system, an

⁵² See especially Dubois and Smith (2007) and Davis (2008).

⁵³ Unless otherwise noted, quotes from Stanton are taken from the five volume set edited by Ann D. Gordon and titled *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony* (2009).

autonomy that Stanton immediately collapses into property. If the citizen is helpless, then, it is precisely because of an inability to claim anything, including the self, as one's own. Perhaps it is possible to say, then, that the function of the ballot is to confirm the existence of something that is proper to oneself, or put differently, a self has thoughts that precedes entry into political space. The vote is therefore nothing less than the visible sign of that which passes as one's own, and hence why the right to suffrage continually slips into the right to property in Stanton's writing.

Approaching the ballot as a concept that transforms the meaning of sovereignty into property opens up the possibility of tracing its operation as a grounding principle, as in the following: "As the ballot-box is the very foundation of government and law, the palladium of our civil and religious libert[ies] it should be to every enfranchised his *sanctum sanctorum*, his Holy of Holies" (II: 99). Elevated to that which is most sacred, the ballot secures the property of the self, and thus authorizes institutions premised upon the undermining of individual sovereignty. As the origin and ground of liberty, the ballot protects and safeguards the citizen against the violation of others. A related question that is thus called forth is the ballot's conceptual relation to violence. In the earlier passages, the ballot takes the place of the bow and arrow, and as such, is directly related to an act of war. The ballot stands in for the force that was once secured through weaponry, a force that is the precondition for self-determination. This point will become particularly significant further into the argument, for women's vote gains legitimacy in Stanton's framework specifically as an affront against (racialized) others. More specifically, however, the ballot is that which legislates disagreement, and puts an end to conflict. Placed in the same frame as the drawing of a weapon, the act of voting is the final word that ends the dispute. The ballot is thus imagined as the ultimate speech-act, one that brings finality to the quarrel through the elimination of the other. Unlike the weapons of the savage, however, the ballot achieves this silencing without violence and without bloodshed. The weapon and the ballot thus accomplish the same end, resolving the conflict over representation through an act that can have no response, that is, by eradicating the possibility of an answer altogether.

If the act of voting is when the sovereignty of the self is expressed and confirmed, it is also the moment at which the very possibility of self-sovereignty is effaced: "The Declaration of Independence struck a blow at every existent form of government by

making the individual the source of all power. This is the sun, and the one central truth around which all genuine republics must keep their course or perish. [National supremacy] means national protection and security in the exercise of the right of self-government, which comes alone by and through the use of the ballot” (III: 353). The recognition of the individual, in other words, is premised upon subordination to the nation, and hence in the end, the ballot can only function as the expression of national supremacy. What can be read in Stanton’s troubled efforts to anchor the right to vote within nature, then, is a more fundamental tension regarding the ballot’s role as the sign of sovereignty. On the one hand, the ballot is the gesture that marks the individual’s assent to the collective of the nation, and in so doing, identifies the individuals that constitute such a collective. In this sense, the signing of the ballot is the moment at which the individual not only authorizes their subordination to the nation, but becomes fully interchangeable with every other. The ballot thus signals the loss of the very possibility of individuality. As Werner Hamacher (1997) puts it, “The vote is raised only to fade immediately away, and it becomes a voting voice, a voice that counts, only by losing its singularity. At best, it fulfills its incommensurability by making itself commensurable” (312). In order to be counted, the singular must be folded into a number, and hence rendered equivalent. On the other hand, the ballot, as we have already seen, circulates as proof that the self is in possession of itself, and thus can be fully represented. Contained within this gesture, then, is also the affirmation that self-determination is retained within such a structure of subordination. Stanton’s “Solitude of the Self,” one of her most cited speeches, makes this point most explicitly:

“The strongest reason why we ask for woman a voice in the government under which she lives...is because of her birthright to self-sovereignty; because, as an individual, she must rely on herself. No matter how much women prefer to lean, to be protected and supported, nor how much men desire to have them do so, they must make the voyage of life alone, and for safety in an emergency they must know something of the laws of navigation” (V: 423).

In Stanton’s articulation, voting exemplifies the solitariness of human life and is the ultimate expression of individual autonomy. Invoked as a kind of navigational chart, the ballot provides woman with guidance, but more importantly, serves as proof that she is independent from man. What is being worked out on the terrain of the ballot, then, is woman’s relationship to the sovereign individual, a relationship that is continually called into question by the very assumption that women, in the plural, require their own

representation. The appeal to women as a group relies upon the denial of the singularity of individual woman, for the vote is extended not to an individual, but to an undifferentiated collective.

Furthermore, the ballot is simultaneously called upon to provide the foundation for individual as well as national sovereignty, and even more importantly, to maintain the fiction that such a distinction exists. If the right to vote is the condition for woman to appear as a self-regulating and self-sufficient individual, then the possibility of self-sovereignty is premised upon the already established sovereignty of the nation. However, the legitimacy of national sovereignty itself relies upon the assumption that the individual precedes it. As a result, the claim to women's suffrage unravels the tie that binds the ballot to sovereignty, a tie that is fundamental to the concept of democratic representation itself.

To return to the initial premise guiding Stanton's platform, that the right to vote constitutes a natural right, a very basic question presents itself: what exactly does it mean for suffrage to be inscribed in nature, given that representation necessarily relies upon political and legal structures? And moreover, what exactly is being identified as *natural* within the right to vote? We can begin the exploration of this set of concerns by noting that Stanton's effort to locate the ballot within nature disassociates it from the institutional framework through which it gains authority and legitimacy. While the significance of the ballot relies upon its relationship to citizenship, the frame of natural rights leveraged by Stanton positions it prior to the constitution of the state. The ruptures that emerge in this undertaking, as we will see, have the contradictory effect of unsettling nature from its position as the self-sufficient ground of rights. In the attempt to present suffrage as a natural right, Stanton draws a distinction between privilege and rights, whereby the latter is associated with the necessary conditions for "physical development:" "To breathe, sleep, walk, eat, and drink are natural rights" (V: 543). Natural rights, she continues, must be derived from the display of wants and needs, and therefore requires the "study of human beings" (V: 543). According to this definition, the content and character of natural rights is tied to the truth of the human, a truth that is revealed through empirical observation. At this juncture, the category of the animal as the difference of the human makes its appearance to authorize such an undertaking: "By observation, we decide the wants of animals, what they can do, their degrees of

intelligence and treat them accordingly” (V: 543). This move, one that binds the human to the animal as parallel objects of knowledge, carries the trace of the taxonomic hierarchy that accompanies it. Comparing the human to the animal, in other words, is only possible through an evolutionary logic that is premised upon measuring stages of development. By marking a conceptual space that is outside of and prior to politics, the animal also sustains the notion that (certain) rights are not contingent upon the state, but are manifested through the sheer fact of living. The treatment that is guaranteed through natural rights, as the case of the animal reveals, requires a *measuring* of intelligence. Within the very articulation of the universality of the human, then, is inscribed the most radical contingency: how one is “treated” is quite literally a function of the capacity for intelligence, or the distance from animality, that one displays.

But what exactly does Stanton suggest can be deduced about natural rights from an empirical study? The child is the next figure that is called upon to confirm the existence of a pure conceptual space beyond the space of politics:

“Children early show a determination to have their own way, a natural desire to govern themselves. Whoever touches their playthings without their consent arouses angry resistance, showing the natural desire to own property. From these manifestations in the human family, at all ages and in all latitudes, we infer that self-government, the protection of people and property, against all encroachments are natural rights” (V: 543).

To make explicit the logic of this passage, the articulation of natural rights hinges upon making claims about the nature of the human, which is always bound to an injunction to exclude. That the child’s behavior functions as “evidence” suggests that an empirical study is necessary for establishing the source and content of these rights. If rights are manifested through the expression of human nature, then, they require committed observation before they can be named. The natural, in other words, comes after a process of induction, a process whereby general laws concerning the human are “inferred” from the child. Nature is projected backwards, after the fact, subsequent to the study. Nature is not the ground that gives rise to rights, but rather something that takes shape only through their exercise, for it is the already assumed nature of self-governance and right to property that allows the child’s actions to be read as illustrative of these principles. In this passage, moreover, the category of desire is also indispensable for linking the child’s anger and determination to conclusions about the nature of rights. A further question thus arises: what is the relationship between desire and rights, and more pointedly, are rights

simply the expression of desire? For Stanton to derive natural rights from a behavioral study requires the underlying assumption that desire, when articulated from a (childish) space that precedes politics, provides a direct conduit into the proper of the self. This causal relationship, in which what is desired is consonant with rights, is yoked together through property. In the most explicit way, Stanton poses the notion of property as a primitive instinct, as the very condition of what it means to be human. Rights, it seems, cannot be thought without property, and desire provides the bridge that links the one to the other. The desire for what can be owned, or possessed in the form of property, serves as the mark of a core and individuated self. This pure desire is conceivable only in relation to an other who is not yet fully human (the child), an other whose desire can be said to be reflective of nature itself. Nature, then, can only be known and accessed through desire, and upon this formulation rests the entire apparatus of legal rights that authorizes women's suffrage.

As we have seen up to this point, Stanton's argument for extending the vote to women relies upon the notion that natural rights are lodged within the universal character of the human, which is not known in advance, but must be brought to the surface through careful observation of the child. Moreover, two assumptions can be said to guide such a study: first, that the child's behavior reveals the true nature of desire, and second, that this desire justifies the claim to rights. To identify what is *natural* about the human, Stanton turns to a difference that is both outside and precedes the constitution of national subjects. This difference, embodied here by the child but at other times by the figure of race, is a subject whose desires are self-present and transparent, or put otherwise, who has yet to be inscribed with desires that are not its own. To exist within the boundaries of society thus symbolizes the distancing of the subject from their own desires, as well as the loss of the ability to represent them. The child is the projection of an originary moment when the subject has access to its own unadulterated meaning, an origin that sustains the narrative of society's degradation at the heart of women's rights. While this narrative begins with the premise that society signals a departure away from nature and hence what is natural about the human, it will also become apparent that it provides the basis for identifying who counts as fully human. The universality that is ascribed to the child's behavior is premised upon this figure marking a unified humanity, an infancy that is shared because it is prior to the introduction of difference. As such, the evidence that legitimates

articulations of natural rights is premised upon an understanding of the human in which difference comes after, and hence can only contaminate, a prior purity. The trope of contamination that will be seen to guide Stanton's argument thus organizes and saturates every level of the text. While the impulse to self-govern is rooted in nature, a desire that manifests itself in the purest form of the human, following this premise through Stanton's writing reveals the way in which it slowly erects and demarcates an enclosure around what constitutes true humanity.

Working within the conceptual frame of natural rights, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's appeal for women's suffrage bears witness to the hierarchies, exclusions, and boundaries that are inscribed in the foundations of its structure, despite the professed commitment to recognizing the universality of man. As postcolonial scholarship has now firmly established, the natural man that serves as the originating ground for the citizen is from the very outset inflected through and through with the specific traces of race and class.⁵⁴ Such markers of ethnocentrism express themselves in both subtle and overt ways within conceptions of the universal citizen that is the bearer of rights. Anchoring itself upon this foundation, the campaign for women's right to vote reproduces the stratified model of humanity that is the legacy of natural rights, while also producing its own set of exclusions. As a result, the conflicts surrounding Stanton's effort to build a coherent case for women's rights bring to the surface tensions embedded within the nature/society opposition, and along with it natural man/citizen man, that lay at the base of natural rights. If feminist political theorists have shown us that the introduction of woman into this equation makes apparent that the supposedly empty category of the citizen is actually embodied by man, what has not been fully sketched out is how "woman" herself crystallizes racial and classed boundaries, or what can be described as distinctly colonial categorizations of difference. The particular constellation of bourgeois whiteness that is taken for granted within Stanton's rhetoric, under this logic, is part of the constitutive baggage of woman's configuration as an individual citizen of the state. While woman, at one level, carries the burden of sexual difference, it is also the case that sexual difference is latched to race and class, making "woman" into an incontrovertibly ethnocentric and bourgeois category.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Mehta (1999) and Parekh (1995).

Woman/Women as the Subject of Rights

Tracing how sexual difference takes shape, and more specifically the classed and racialized meanings that lend it coherence, begins in the collapse between individual woman and collective women. As noted earlier, woman never remains for long in the singular for her insertion into the frame of the individual citizen demands the consolidation of women, in the plural, as a discrete and homogenous group. Stanton's conflicted articulations suggest that the feminist struggle for the right to vote circles around the impossibility of separating "woman" as a sovereign individual from "women" as a collective group, a distinction that is necessary to maintaining rights as the mark of individual sovereignty. More specifically, woman appears as an autonomous subject at the same moment that she is absorbed back into a generalized category of difference, a relationship that impels and prescribes the claim to sisterhood. The push to recognize a universal experience of subjugation is also therefore about endowing "women" with meaning. Articulations of global solidarity that follow from this have been rigorously dismantled, most notably by postcolonial feminists,⁵⁵ for disaggregating gender oppression from other relations of power, a move that consequently poses white woman as the normative subject and measure for feminist liberation. What a reading of Stanton can contribute to this critique is an understanding of the underlying mechanism that drives such claims to universality, and its structural relationship to women's rights. In other words, the particularly "global" character of women's oppression that appears in Stanton's writing, and the appeal to a unity premised upon shared experience, is intimately bound to the negotiation between sexual difference and natural rights. Visions of sisterhood that reach beyond the horizon of the nation-state were thus not a late arrival on the scene, as the stagist history of feminist liberation goes, but have always played a central role in the discourse of women's rights. Indeed, the global character of women's oppression, and the sense that the severity of that oppression was distinctly worse elsewhere, was already present in the margins of Wollstonecraft's treatise.

Following from this precedent, the impetus for sisterhood in Stanton's case

⁵⁵ For a postcolonial critique of global sisterhood, see most notably the work of Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Leila Ahmed and Inderpal Grewal. Given the wide breadth of this critique, this list is on only a beginning.

emerges out of the shuttling that takes place between the autonomous, sovereign individual, on the one hand, and “women” as a group, on the other. This oscillation comes about because women’s exclusion is defined as the failure to recognize the content and meaning of sexual difference (in other words, that woman’s voice cannot be represented by man), while at the same time the corrective to such exclusion rests upon the claim to a self that is unmarked by difference. As we have seen up to this point, Stanton’s defense of suffrage positions the ballot as a conduit and expression of the sovereignty of the individual prescribed by nature. The conflicts that she encounters in trying to establish demonstrable proof of sovereignty are symptoms of the fissures in the model of the autonomous subject that is at its base. In particular, the attachment to a core being that contains the truth of the individual gains increasing importance throughout the course of Stanton’s writings. Her preoccupation with this theme is crystallized in the following:

Our inner being, which we call ourself, no eye nor touch of man nor angel has ever pierced. It is more hidden than the caves of the gnome, the sacred adytum of the oracle, the hidden chamber of Eleusinian mystery: for to it only omniscience is permitted to enter. Such is individual life. Who, I ask you, can take, who dare take on himself the responsibility of deciding the rights, the duties, the limitations of another human soul? (IV: 85)

Substituting metaphor after metaphor, these lines reveal the frenzied attempt to claim a proper self, a self that is one’s own and that cannot be possessed by another. However, knowledge of this inner-most core seems to evade even the self. Indeed, this “inner being” emerges as a fiction, located in the same realm as the gnome, the oracle and the Eleusinian mystery. If what is proper to the self has never been accessed, concealed away in an other-worldly dimension, then this also means that it is not available to the subject, and thus cannot be represented to itself. Yet this idea that the subject must follow its own truth, a truth that resides deep within itself, is presumably the defining sign of autonomy and what has been violated in relation to woman.

If the Enlightenment model of the subject with its authentic and unique core becomes a principle idea in the trajectory of Stanton’s thought, it points to the pressure placed upon the suffragist argument to establish woman as an indivisible, sovereign subject that is indistinguishable from man. Put otherwise, the case for woman’s fundamental sameness to man hinges upon the notion that all individuals share the fact of being resolutely singular. Building upon this universal condition of the individual,

Stanton renders suffrage into the very expression of the individual's responsibility to their own life, as well as proof of self-sufficiency. As in the passage above, the vote is quite literally endowed with the burden of proving that the individual's life relies only upon itself for meaning and direction, rather than being constituted through relationships with others. Stanton's speech on the topic of suffrage as a natural right, however, exposes the ways in which this conceptual framework cannot sustain woman as a fully autonomous subject, or in other words, woman in the singular. Protesting the denial of the ballot on the grounds of its function as a weapon-of-defense, Stanton urges: "Does any thoughtful man really believe that he has a natural right to deprive another of the means of self-protection, and that he has the wisdom to govern individuals and classes better than they can govern themselves? England's experiment with Ireland, Russia with Poland, the Southern States with Africans, the Northern States with women, all prove the impossibility of one class legislating with fairness of another" (V: 540). There are two moves to be noted here. First, as the text shifts from articulating the significance of self-sovereignty, which is explicitly marked as masculine, to the injustice of women's exclusion, the category of the individual expands to the composite "individuals-and-classes." Once woman enters the picture, the question of the self's ability to institute and follow its own law, to confirm its sovereignty by defending itself, gets collapsed into a concern with "classes" legislating for one another. It is not a matter of woman governing herself, then, but women governing *themselves* as members of a collective unity. What enables woman's relationship to man to be compared to colonialism and slavery, a comparison that can be traced throughout the trajectory of women's rights, is precisely this collapse of "woman" into "women." As the logic of this chain of equivalence goes, the subordination of women can only be thought in relation to the term to which she is appended, that is, man. Hence the second move, in which the denial of the vote is rendered interchangeable with the violence of enslavement and imperial rule, is one that also commits the erasure of woman from the frame of colonialism and slavery. Woman is fixed in relation to Anglo-American white masculinity, such that sexual difference can only appear *in parallel*, but never transected by, racial and colonial difference. The movement from the individual to the collective, what appears as a fundamentally inclusionary gesture, is therefore ultimately predicated upon the erasure of racial difference from the category of "women."

At the outset of the last passage, suffrage is yet again associated with self-protection. This suggests that, within Stanton's oratory, the most pressing right that is signified and enacted by the ballot is not participation in the political life of society, but rather the right of the individual to safeguard themselves from enemies. What is striking about this description is that the vote is not imagined as an action that takes place principally within the context of a collective, or as an affirmation of sociality, but rather as a matter of self-preservation and to guard against an ever-present and unnamed threat. But what, exactly, does the individual seek protection from? Who or what is the object that perpetually endangers, and in what way does the ballot guard against this threat? The emphasis on protection proves all the more fraught given that the ideal of women as weak and defenseless subjects is also the discourse that legitimizes women's limited access and participation in the civic sphere. Caught in the cleavages of this terrain, Stanton stakes the right to vote on a subject that is conceived as potential victim, while simultaneously challenging the notion that women are in special need of protection. Disarticulating protection from rights, she associates the former with colonial rule and the latter with democracy. A kind of governing that is based on protection, she argues, is premised upon a hierarchy of "rulers and subjects" (Dubois 313). Such a hierarchy assigns positions of innate inferiority and superiority, and hands over the law-making to the dominant group. In the end, the problem with a relationship organized upon protection is that some do not make the law "for themselves." This structural similarity is the common denominator that allows the common law related to "Saxon wives and mothers" to be compared to the governing "such as the United States gave to the African race, such as Great Britain gives to Ireland, such as the Czar of Russia gives to his subjects on the frozen plains of Siberia, and such as the eagle gives to the lamb he carries to his eyrie" (314). This passage recurs numerous times in Stanton's speeches, and points to the continued ways in which such a comparative staging renders women's subordination compossible with slavery and colonialism. However, while these various structures of exploitation are posed as synonymous with one another, the particular power relations that bear upon women *as women*, can only be thought outside of and separate from state-sponsored or racial domination. The appearance of "Saxon" as the qualifier to "wives and mothers" thus makes visible what is inherent within the drawing of such parallels. With every connection that is made to other oppressed groups, "woman" becomes more deeply

entrenched within the confines of whiteness.

To counter the logic of protection, Stanton calls for the individual to be stripped of all particularity, and opposes equality to the recognition of difference:

The white man's "wards" have all alike, Africans, Indians, women and Labor been crippled by his guardianship and protection, and have alike avenged themselves... We have thrown the African race on its own responsibility and it does not crave the old guardianship again... And this is all we ask for woman, the same advantages, opportunities, and code of laws man claims for himself, no discriminations on the ground of sex, no 'protection,' but justice, liberty, equality. (II: 631)

In the triangle of domination that emerges from this account, the "African," the "Indian," the worker and "woman" are all positioned equally in relation to the epicenter of "white man," and hence are necessarily understood to be seeking the same ends. Such a conceptualization of the political field attaches the rights that are being demanded to the recognition of distinct identity groups, while in the same gesture declaring their absolute insignificance. The hardening of the boundaries between social collectivities organized by race, class and gender thus takes place at the same moment in which what is being requested is to be seen solely as (white) man. The solution to subordination envisioned by Stanton ultimately relies upon the fundamental interchangeability of these groups, as well as the assumption that they can be neatly isolated from one another. As such, the conceptualization of women's freedom advanced within the campaign for suffrage cannot tolerate a multitude of ends, or different imaginings of justice. On the contrary, it prescribes a single and totalizing prescription for what "justice, liberty, equality" looks like, not simply for women, but for the marginalized writ large: the exchange of dependence with self-sovereignty. For this, the collective must disappear, leaving the individual to carry the full burden of responsibility for the fate that befalls them. In the denouement of this passage, "women" makes the reverse movement back into singular woman, signaling the ways in which responsibility cannot be thought as a collective condition. Not surprisingly, the discussion quickly moves to criminalization: "The best policy we can inaugurate for the Indian is to treat him the same way. Make no discrimination for or against him, hunger and taxation and the just penalty for individual crime would soon settle the problem of work, property and law" (II: 631). Indeed, to be "treated the same way" is to be subject to the penalty of the law, and thus equality is defined as the possibility of being turned into a criminal. In the course of building her

case for eliminating sexual difference as a qualifier for rights, Stanton defends the brutal repression of American Indians, and quite literally advocates famine as a strategy for incorporating unruly subjects into the regime of propertied citizenship. So what is to be made of this correlation, and the pattern of women's suffrage being tied to the abdication of responsibility in respect to histories of racialized oppression? Tracing how the logic of the comparison is necessitated by Stanton's argument, and the subtle modes through which "woman" is generated by the constant disarticulation of sexual and racial difference, suggests that the intolerance to the suffering of the American Indian is part of the larger meaning-making apparatus that poses suffrage as protection from the threat of the other.

The inviolability of natural rights that Stanton initially turns to as the principle ground for women's suffrage also proves to carry its own set of problems. Namely, does the responsibility for safeguarding these rights lie in nature or society? How should this responsibility be parceled and what is the role of each? And furthermore, if rights are attached to birth, and cannot by definition be taken away, what precisely does it mean to be disenfranchised? Confronted with the task of articulating the significance of representation, Stanton appeals to group identities as self-evident and natural: "The nobleman cannot make just laws for the peasant; the slaveholder for the slave; neither can man make and execute just laws for woman, because in each case, the one in power fails to apply the immutable principles of right to any grade but his own" (I: 158). According to this particular set of comparisons, man cannot represent the interests of woman because the master will never act on behalf of those whom he exploits. Moreover, the unbreakable ties to one's "grade," a term that invokes economic power along with an identity group, make it such that man will never accord rights to others beside himself. The dilemma that confronts woman is here staged as a larger problematic about the ability of democratic representation to fulfill the doctrine of natural rights. Despite the fact that the rights in question are "immutable," they are nevertheless at the mercy of the biases and interests of those who hold the power. And because those in power see themselves not as members of humanity, but identify with the privileges associated with their social class, they will never fully safeguard the rights of the marginalized. The relationship of man to woman, and hence the question of sexual difference itself, is thus rendered legible as the problem of the intractability of collective ties within a system

organized around the unit of the individual. If woman enters the arena of the voting subject as a “class” (or a “grade”), it is therefore only by disaggregating her from other relations of subordination, including master/slave and nobleman/peasant. Although the comparison politicizes sexual inequality by aligning it with power relationships that are recognizably premised upon the appropriation and exploitation of another’s labor, such a model proceeds by demarcating these relationships as fundamentally distinct. By consequence, “woman” is placed within a space of pure sexual oppression. The comparison that is staged here by rendering woman interchangeable with the peasant and the slave is thus far from innocent, for in describing power as a function of discrete identity categories, woman comes to be established as a referent for whiteness.

Furthermore, sexual difference is given meaning as a relationship of inequality that is similar in structure to that between the master and the slave, the aristocracy and the peasant. If woman is continually being fixed and stabilized within the contours of a text, then in this instance, she is made legible as an identity premised upon social and economic capital. To be woman is therefore to be exploited on the basis of belonging to a dominated social group. In this line of argumentation, the recognition of a larger collectivity of women provides the basis for women’s rights. Stanton’s conceptualization of women’s separate identity and interest echoes the conversations that surrounded the colonists’ efforts to articulate their right to independence and self-sovereignty from England. In pointing to the tensions that characterized their arguments, Sheldon Wolin (1989) notes that the colonists were at once claiming their specific difference from England while simultaneously arguing for the same rights as Englishmen.⁵⁶ These problems deepened, Wolin continues, as they began to turn to theories of natural rights: “[the colonists] were becoming increasingly self-conscious about the separateness of their interests and identity, but they attempted to defend what was concrete and local by appeals to what was universal and transcendent, that is, to what was “true” regardless of time and circumstance (132).” Drawing out the resonances between Stanton and the

⁵⁶ This resonance is also notable given that the document drafted at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, an event that is credited to Stanton as the central organizer, models itself on the Declaration of Independence. Invoking the right to a government derived from the consent of the government, and the tyrannical rule that makes women occupy a position different from “the one to which the laws of nature and nature’s God entitle them,” the declaration already contains within it the defense of women’s vote in the name of the race, and the hierarchy of man that is contained within it. In the list of injuries committed by man against woman, the document states: “He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men—both natives and foreigners.”

colonists is not to suggest, in the logic of the comparison, that it is always the same mechanism at play, and hence the players, whether they be colonists and the English, woman or man, are ultimately inconsequential. Instead, the point is that there is a tension at the very core of natural rights, which arises from the need to claim a separate identity as the basis for inclusion in relation to an order that presumably has already recognized everyone.⁵⁷ The relationship of woman to man is always made coherent by recourse to other grids of intelligibility, in this case one that holds together the universality of the subject. To make sense of women's sovereignty in terms of her position as an oppressed class has repercussions for what kinds of solutions can emerge, and what is understood to be the problem of sexual difference in the first place.

Although the condition of women's subordination constantly appears alongside and within the same frame as structures of power that operate through race and class, these comparisons have the effect of keeping woman inscribed within the boundaries of the Anglo-Saxon. Sexual difference is pitted against a figure of (masculinized) racial otherness, such that woman can only appear under the sign of whiteness. In addition to this, two opposing pulls surrounding the meaning of sexual difference are beginning to take shape. In one direction, Stanton pushes to make sexual difference irrelevant in relation to the state and the law. Pointing to the structural inequality that resides within forms of rule that assign meaning (and hence inequality) to markers of social identity, Stanton contends that woman must be stripped of her difference so that only the stark nakedness of the individual remains. Following this line, she advocates for individual responsibility and the right to protect one's autonomy, while opposing the logic of protection more broadly. In the other direction, and the one that has yet to be fully developed, woman's membership within a greater collective provides the rationale for why women need rights. Here women are assigned an immutable difference which necessitates that they represent themselves, everywhere from the ballot box to the jury stand. How this collective of women is imagined, and what is claimed as the sameness that unites them in their difference from man is what will be turned to next.

Stanton's insistence on the separateness of woman's identity leads her to make the recurring appeal for women's right to a trial by a jury of peers. Situating this right as the

⁵⁷ For Ranciere (1999), claims that make this disjuncture visible, namely by questioning who is included in the count of the whole, is precisely the definition of politics.

marker of advanced civilization, which betrays the ways in which so-called natural rights are always routed through a teleology of man, she argues that women must be judged by other women because “the interests of man and woman in the present underdeveloped state of the race...are and must be antagonistic” (I: 158). To insist that man is not woman’s “peer” is indeed a dangerous claim, for it cites the very logic that has always been invoked to bar women’s access to the rights of citizenship. Under this rubric, woman is in need of her own representation because of her essential difference from man. The accompanying premise, then, is that woman is justly represented by a member of the same, or more succinctly, that women are representable through sexual difference. The insistence on women’s right to a trial by jury of one’s peers demonstrates how the abstract categories of citizenship take the masculine subject as their referent. In its original incarnation, this right is not associated with sexual difference, in the sense of man’s right to be judged by other men, given that the masculinity of the subject is already taken for granted. Sexual difference is therefore not a salient category for masculinity precisely because it is the universal, and as a result, the masculine subject is open to being viewed in terms of other components of identity. Revisiting this now-classic articulation of the problematic of gender is useful for thinking through the ways in which the appeal to the same rights as man takes the form of solidifying the distinctiveness of women’s identity. The trap that the struggle for suffrage continually finds itself up against is that the very premise of the demand requires that woman appear only as sexual difference. Invoking the right to a trial by a jury of peers has the effect of consolidating a core and essential identity to women, and hardening sexual difference as that which constitutes her being. Yet it is also important to note that, in this passage, the disjuncture between the interests of woman and man is held out as a transitory condition that will be resolved with the advent of progress. Difference is something archaic, a vestige of man’s past that will be shed in the future once the development of the race is fulfilled. The consolidation of women thereby takes place within, and also produces, the Anglo-Saxon collective that bears the name of the “the race.”

When expanded to woman, the ballot cannot remain the mark of a self-contained and self-regulating individuality, for its extension requires that the excluded be named as a group. The claim to a shared experience of oppression, alluded to earlier, emerges out of the tensions concerning the individual and the collective that result from making

natural rights accountable to sexual difference. As this reading has sought to demonstrate, the positing of “woman” as a sovereign individual is accompanied every time by the consolidation of an underlying unity to “women.” As such, the expansion of the category into a transhistorical sign of marginalization, or the impulse, in other words, to project the experience of patriarchal subordination as a universal condition, arises out of the tension between “woman” and the subject of rights. In the passage that follows, Stanton stakes a claim to a larger collective that reaches beyond the imagined boundaries of the American polity, a claim that lays the ground for articulations of global sisterhood, and the transnational solidarities (still) organized around an assumed collective of women that takes its place in contemporary feminist scholarship. In an address to the International Council of Women (1886), Stanton begins: “Whether our feet are compressed in iron shoes, our faces hidden with veils and masks, whether yoked with cows to draw the plow through its furrows, or classed with idiots, lunatics, and criminals in the laws and constitutions of the State, the principle is the same, for the humiliations of spirit are as real as the visible badges of servitude” (V: 95). Given the resonance of this statement with subsequent modalities of global feminist solidarity, the question must be posed: what conceptualization of “woman” enables this identification of a “we,” and what impels such an expression of shared servitude? Let us first note that in this opening gesture, Stanton brings together different forms and manifestations of subordination, and names them as having the same underlying character. The collective that she calls forth is thus one whose common is a single, irreducible experience of subjection. Moreover, the positing of this unified subjection, one that culminates in the collapsing of difference into the “our,” relies upon taking “woman” as a coherent category prior to these relationships. As Chandra Mohanty argued in her seminal work “Under Western Eyes,” the hierarchy of oppression that casts Third World women as always more victimized, and thereby the perpetual objects of feminist liberation rather than its subjects, takes form out of the practice of assuming that women are fully constituted prior to their insertion within specific sets of social relations and networks of power. Mohanty’s framing suggests that the collapsing of radically discontinuous instances of subjection under the sign of sexism or patriarchy, a move that opens the door for comparing and thus hierarchizing relative freedom, turns upon the assumption of woman as a stable category that awaits to be filled with specific representations. Building from Mohanty’s argument,

it can be said that the assertion of commonality captured in the claiming of another's oppression as one's own ("our feet" and "our faces") retroactively produces a unified concept of "woman" as its effect. Rather than stopping with the recognition that the colonial logic of comparison perpetuated within feminist scholarship takes "woman" for granted, then, the next step is to think what "woman" precisely this is. Put differently, what ground is posed, fixed, and assigned to this concept as a result of the contention of "our" shared subordination? Pursuing this question shifts the discussion away from identifying "bad" forms of representation, an endeavor which can only remain guided by truth as its end, to how "woman" structures understandings of what subordination looks like and how it may be recognized as such. This undertaking is particularly pressing given that the ability to clearly demarcate subordination from freedom, and to identify properly liberated subjects from the oppressed, lies at the very heart of liberalism.

Within the development of Stanton's argument, the claim to a broader experience of marginalization, one that traverses differences coded through race, arises in the struggle to articulate the injustice that accompanies legal exclusion. As such, the turn to the other occurs at the moment in which the effect of women's exclusion from the polity requires demonstrative "proof." The introduction of the comparison at this juncture is indicative in that, at the very least, it suggests the difficulty of articulating the content of the wrong that is promulgated by the denial of the vote. But more specifically, what can be read in this turn is the disjuncture between the law and the structure of patriarchy, and an anxiety that the law might be incapable of fully accounting for the question of women's subordination. Perhaps better put, the meaning of woman's inequality cannot be fully recognized or represented by the law, and this very possibility is what a commitment to the subject of natural rights cannot tolerate. Through its recognition of subjects, the law provides affirmation that the autonomy and sovereignty of the individual precedes it, which is also the premise that nature exists prior to and before the law.⁵⁸ The stability of this relationship (nature as the ground of the law) relies upon the law's ability to conceptualize as well as represent conditions of subordination. It is through the recognition of inequality, which demands constant repetition, that the law produces natural equality as the condition of humanity. In that sense, the possibility of a repression that escapes its terms threatens to undermine its legitimacy and by

⁵⁸ For a complete discussion of this point, see Derrida's "Force of Law."

consequence, its absolute hold on justice. With this as the starting point, Stanton's assertion of women's oppression as always and fundamentally the same must also be seen as deeply implicated in securing the authority of the law.

In Stanton's articulation of a nascent global sisterhood, the legal exclusion of "woman," and her inscription outside the boundaries of an individuality that takes representation as the recognition of its humanity, is given weight by invoking distinctly physical forms of repression. In this sense, what might be characterized as the *invisible* injustice of disenfranchisement finds expression through the representation of the tangible, material violence experienced by racialized difference. The violence of the other in Stanton's rhetoric thus performs several functions. On the one hand, it marks the bodily infliction of patriarchy in contrast to which the sexual repression attached to liberalism can be demarcated and classified as being of a different order. The logic of a comparison, as this chapter has continually sought to trace, produces as different the very "cases" that it brings together under the umbrella of the same. In that sense, the specter of foot-binding, the veil-as-mask, and coerced brute labor circulate as markers of an exterior to the subordination committed by the State. Although posed as equivalent instances of injustice that rests upon a claim to woman's difference, the chain of meaning that is established serves to draw the line between a violence committed by the law's inconsistencies, and the violence that is perpetuated outside the boundaries of the liberal state. The violence attached to liberalism is cast as an error of classification, for Stanton's claim in relation to her own case is that woman has been wrongfully placed within the same category as "idiots, lunatics and criminals." Furthermore, the character of this violence is described in terms of *humiliation*. A recurring trope in her writing, the charge of humiliation locates the implications of disenfranchisement at an individual, and particularly psychological, level. The representation of inequality in terms of its individual effects is, most broadly, consonant with the liberal model of responsibility, which transforms structural relations of power into matters of the psyche. Such narratives of self-healing, to employ David Palumbo-Liu's term, casts marginalization as an individual problem to be overcome through introspection. Stanton's emphasis on the humiliation that accompanies exclusion therefore delimits the failures of liberalism to an emotive response, and poses subordination as an insult to be remedied through apology.

What is perhaps most significant here, however, is that the violence identified by

Stanton does not concern the injustice of exclusion itself, but rather the inappropriate adjudication of the (natural) social hierarchy. The assumption that the inferior, identified in this passage as “idiots, lunatics and criminals,” are not part of the democratic polity, but constitute a “class” that is self-evidently excluded from the rights of man, remains unchallenged. In other words, the premise that certain subjects are more adequately suited for suffrage than others, and hence that natural rights are the domain of those who properly belong within the boundaries of society, provides the guiding logic to Stanton’s defense of women’s rights. First of all, this suggests that the challenge to women’s exclusion did not take the form of a challenge against disenfranchisement writ large. This is particularly significant in that the history of the women’s suffrage movement is traditionally narrated as a humanist project that contributed to the eventual retraction of any qualifications to universal equality. The story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony’s life-long dedication to these principles is therefore crucial to the staging of the liberal state as both self-reflexive in its admission of past failures, and continually reaching towards the complete fulfillment of its commitment to the universality of the human. To contend with the ways in which woman’s suffrage not only operated with the premise of a hierarchical social order, but posed its aims precisely in the name of such a hierarchy, therefore fundamentally reframes what was at stake in the question of woman’s equality.⁵⁹

Defining Women’s Exclusion

Stanton’s recurring condemnation of what she terms an “aristocracy of sex” provides a starting point for developing this argument. In likening the limits placed on suffrage to the structure of monarchical rule, Stanton is unmistakably drawing upon the terms laid out by Mary Wollstonecraft. To frame the challenge against women’s political

⁵⁹ Louise Michele Newman (1999) has provided a crucial intervention into this narrative by arguing that Elizabeth Cady Stanton, along with other suffragists of the period, were driven not by a concern with universal equality, but rather the future of the Anglo-Saxon race. This commitment to racial progress and the advancement of white women, as Newman points out, cuts across the suffragist and anti-suffragist divide. In an insightful reframing, Newman suggests that both camps organized themselves in relation to the same end, but simply chose to mobilize racialized femininity differently. This argument also challenges the progress narrative of feminism, which poses the success of the suffrage movement as the overcoming of conservative and reactionary forces. See Newman’s chapter titled “The Making of a White Citizenry: Suffragism, Antisuffragism and Race.”

exclusion as part of a larger affront to a social order based upon inherited power is thus already to make the problem of sexual difference legible as a question concerning the origins of political power. Within this frame, the subjugation of women is explained as the problematic of linking power to “artificial” distinctions, understood as such because they are beyond the control or decree of the individual. To think women’s political exclusion in terms of aristocracy is thus already to pose sexual difference as a category that can be understood as analogous to, and hence separate from, class distinctions. The idea that women’s subjection represents the sole remaining relic of an aristocratic system was already firmly established and in circulation before Stanton coined her trademark phrase, most famously in John Stuart Mill’s “On the Subjection of Woman.” In this essay, Mill argues that what separates the “modern world” from the old is that birth no longer determines an individual’s social position. Rather, what constitutes modernity is that individuals are “free to employ their faculties” to determine the course of their life (134). The elimination of inherited inequalities, marked by the disappearance of figures such as the slave, the serf, and the plebeian, is part of the rational process of establishing the most efficient economic order: “...that freedom of individual choice is now known to be the only thing which procures the adoption of the best processes, and throws each operation into the hands of those who are best qualified for it” (135). Following this line of thought, the problem with women’s political and economic subjection to men is that it poses a barrier to natural competition, and the establishment of a social order in which the potential of every individual is best maximized. In this vision of an economy organized by the innate abilities of its constituents, the injustice done to women is that she cannot partake in the competition that is the foundation of modernity: “At present, in the more improved countries, the disabilities of women are the only case, save one [i.e. royalty], in which laws and institutions take persons at their birth and ordain that they shall never in all their lives be allowed to compete for certain things” (136).

Two points of relevance for tracing the persistence of hierarchies within Stanton’s assessment of women’s condition can be taken from Mill. First, in Mill’s account, the elimination of aristocracy’s vertically ordered and intransigent model of society is situated as part of a larger narrative of progress, suggesting that identifying its lasting remnants is also about providing concrete, measurable signs that modernity has supplanted the past. While Europe’s position as a more developed, “improved” country

is reified by the teleology that subtends this narrative, the ultimate fulfillment of progress rests upon the state of women's emancipation from feudal ideas. More specifically, the state of competition comes to stand as the sign that aristocracy and its accompanying relations of domination have been eliminated. In its place, Mill describes a terrain where equally situated players "compete" for their social position, and naturally end up in a place that is consonant with their "abilities." The insight to be garnered here is that representing women's inequality as a function of aristocracy has the effect of naturalizing the dynamics of capitalism that necessitate the devaluing of certain forms of labor, and condemn entire populations to poverty. The consequences of such a seemingly benign metaphor relating women's subjugation to the structure of feudal society therefore needs to be contended with. Contained within this narrative frame is the affirmation that situations of relative power in "advanced" countries are based on merit, labor, and the individual's commitment to their life goals, rather than on "artificial" or chance accidents of birth. With the introduction of women into the competitive field, so the story goes, Europe will have finally shed its lasting attachments to the old regime, leaving individual choice to reign supreme over the entire network of social relations. In sum, this resonance between Mill and Stanton suggests that relating sexual inequality as an obdurate feudal distinction naturalizes the exploitation that is endemic to capitalism by situating its hierarchies of labor as a matter of the individual's "natural" abilities.

The second point has to do with the terms on which Mill explains and rationalizes the risks associated with this *laissez-faire* approach. The state and the law need not determine an individual's vocation, argues Mill, because it will necessarily be the case that people will take up occupations for which they are "most fit" (135). And if the "unfitness is real" and a person attempts to undertake a task beyond their capabilities, "the ordinary motives of human conduct will on the whole suffice to prevent the incompetent person from making, or from persisting in, the attempt" (135). Mill continues: "In all things of any difficulty and importance, those who can do them well are fewer than the need, even with the most unrestricted latitude of choice: and any limitation on the field of selection deprives society of some chances of being served by the competent, without ever saving it from the incompetent" (136). To begin from the most basic reflection, Mill's commitment to challenging the "arbitrary" system of inherited social rank divides society into two constituent groups, the fit and the unfit, the

competent and the incompetent. In contrast to his initial declarations in support of the individual's freedom to pursue "the lot which may appear to them most desirable," Mill produces an equally insurmountable system of social stratification (134). In the end, it is not about will or desire, but rather an intrinsic competency. To curtail the anxieties that may be flared by the prospect of the masses pursuing their greatest ambitions, Mill provides the assurance that the elite are not simply distinguished by birth, but by an ingrained set of skills and intelligence that places them apart from the rest. Consequently, society will naturally order itself to counter the tendencies of the unfit to achieve more than they are able. In many ways, this perspective carries a prescription that has a far more totalizing finality to it, for it suggests that there is no need for an ordained or institutionally-backed system of hierarchy. The sheer unfitness of some will keep them in their place. Or even more significantly, it is something internal to the individual, a kind of self-generated "fitness," that determines their positioning within society, and hence dictating social worth through outside measures can only be redundant. An emerging pattern in Stanton and now Mill, these supposed theorists of liberal equality were never committed to dismantling the privileges of the elite, but were actually deeply invested and concerned with their maintenance. What this might point towards is not just that ideas about equality were compatible with deeply entrenched notions of a stratified humanity at this moment in history, as some scholars have put the question,⁶⁰ but rather that equality was articulated precisely in the name of hierarchy. In other words, for Stanton and Mill, liberal equality is fundamentally about securing the right of the fit to survive and flourish. If Mill deploys the categories of the fit and the unfit, then, it is not to be viewed as the last throws of an earlier order. Instead, the terms through which Mill represents women's subjection as an object of knowledge separates those whose existence benefits society from those who only contribute incompetency, and hence are nothing short of disposable.⁶¹

⁶⁰ For instance, Bikhu Parekh (1995) suggests that ideas about universal equality coexisted with support of colonial projects in the writings of Locke and Mill, and that this disjuncture was enabled by a series of factors, including "belief in the uniformity of human nature" and the tendency "to see difference as deviation" (96).

⁶¹ This point is particularly important given that Mill's support of women's rights, on the one hand, and his rationalization of colonialism and the need for "despotic rule" in India, on the other, has been identified as a contradiction in his political views. For example, Jennifer Pitts (2005) gestures towards the dissonance between these commitments: "John Stuart Mill was attuned to a degree remarkable for a man of his day to the ways in which European society and laws infantilized women...At the same time, he accepted with

Reading Stanton through Mill brings forth a set of consonances between them that provide a broader mapping of the ways in which the articulation of women's equality was accompanied by rigid ideas concerning the ordering of subjects within society. Echoing Mill, Stanton's denouncement of an aristocracy of sex and her vigilant repudiations of a "government based on the cast and class principle" is accompanied by a vision of justice that even more steadfastly shackles inferiority to an inherent nature (Dubois 191). An 1868 address to the American Equal Rights Association begins with a forceful critique of the underlying assumptions associated with aristocratic authority: "The aristocratic idea, in any form, is opposed to the genius of our free institutions, to our own declaration of rights, and to the civilization of the age. All artificial distinctions, whether of family, blood, wealth, color, or sex, are equally repressive on the degraded classes and equally destructive to national life and prosperity" (Dubois 191). In the course of this same paragraph, however, what began as an argument against the logic of a "degraded class" moves to the invoking of a clear and unquestioned hierarchy. She ends:

"If serfdom, peasantry and slavery have shattered kingdoms, deluged continents with blood, scattered republics like dust before the wind, and rent our own Union asunder, what kind of a government, think you, American statesmen, you can build, with the mothers of the race crouching at your feet, while iron-heeled peasants, serfs and slaves, exalted by your hands, tread our inalienable rights into the dust?" (Dubois 192).

The challenge that Stanton articulates, then, is far from breaking with a taxonomic understanding of society, for peasants, serfs, and slaves not only continue to circulate as accepted categories that determine the social fate of the individual, but are further reified as signs for the incapacity of self-government. As such, the logic of the passage reinscribes the natural order underlying slavery, for what has been violated, according to Stanton, is white woman's position within the family of man, a position that relies upon these other figures to confirm her superiority. As such, Stanton's critique is not leveled at an ordering of society premised upon measuring the relative worth of its constituents, but rather at the notion that woman is subject to the rule of the inferior. Her opposition to an

little question the view that Indians were similarly immature and incapable of self-government" (5). The casting of this relationship as a contradiction keeps the operation of racial difference within the support of women's rights shielded from scrutiny. Although this point would need to be further developed, Mill turns to the same concepts to legitimate both positions, namely civilizational progress and the logic of "human improvement," suggesting that support for women's rights and the colonial project are not in opposition, but joined by a necessary complicity.

aristocracy of sex, then, is that the proper hierarchy has been unsettled and is in need of redress: the ignorant have been positioned above the “educated and refined.” The challenge to a regime of inherited power and its corresponding privileges is thus firmly delimited to whiteness. For everybody else, it is only natural that birth determines social status.

Once again, the consolidation of “woman,” on whose behalf Stanton wages her struggle is revealed to rely upon the division of humanity into those capable of governing themselves, and those who must be governed for their own good. The woman that emerges as in need of political representation is thus, at the most basic level, constituted in difference from another woman who is variously expelled to the category of the uneducated, ignorant, and uncultivated. And furthermore, it is taken for granted that these markers position an individual beyond the entitlements associated with natural rights. Responding to anxieties voiced on the part of anti-suffragists concerning exactly which women would show up at the polls, Stanton agrees to the underlying terms of the argument. “In Wyoming,” she retorts, “where women have voted for nine years, the evidence shows that the best women do go to the polls, the worst do not” (Dubois 240). She continues by citing the testimony of a Wyoming Supreme Court judge proclaiming that only “delicate” and “cultured” women have been shown to participate in political life (240). Given that Stanton’s support for women’s rights is explicitly premised upon the exclusion of the “worst” women, it is perhaps better described as a political platform dedicated to preserving the distinction between the higher and lower orders, rather than one seeking equality. This tracing of the ways in which “woman” is specified within the claim for equal rights is not simply a matter of exposing Stanton’s stubborn commitment to bourgeois ideals and the limits of her universality, for while such an argument is important in demystifying a canonical heroine of the feminist movement, it remains focused on her individual shortcomings. Instead, such exclusions can be approached as the byproducts of a liberal order whose foundational principles gain their legibility and coherence through a teleology of man. Within this order, woman can only be conferred humanity through recognition as the same, but this ostensibly universal subject of rights is achieved through the constant positing of others that lack the same humanity.

Feminist scholars of Stanton’s work have charged that focusing on such points can only be simplifications of her political convictions that glibly overlook the pressures

under which she was working.⁶² By contrast, it might be possible to suggest that the rationale for women's suffrage has always relied upon differentiating which subjects are suited to belong to the democratic community, and that exploring the implications of this lineage of women's rights is not driven by the end of assigning guilt or demonizing Stanton. Conflating such an undertaking with a moralizing of Stanton's motivations only serves to reinstate a willful and agential subject at the base of politics and a notion of intent as the measure for determining the effects of particular interpretive frames. This tendency to insist on the necessity of her, albeit unfortunate, strategic maneuverings required for the ultimate achievement of the end goal has deflected attention away from studying how the categories of the human, man, and woman are continually split, divided and ranked. Stanton's allegiance to the "best women" cannot be dismissed as a strategy to placate her opponents, for over and over again the self-evidence of categories that assign intrinsic value to social groups provides the basis for including (some) women within the voting polity. In liberal democracy's own self narrative, its admittedly prejudiced origin was reformed and rewritten through the struggles undertaken on the part of the excluded. The promise of liberal representation is therefore redeemed through a constant reminder of the ways in which inclusion has functioned as the corrective to exclusion. For this reason, the memorializing of the violence surrounding these historical omissions serves to reify rather than threaten the assumption that justice is achieved through the recognition of ever more proliferating social groups. Drawing apart the relationship between "woman" and the right to suffrage offers an opening for challenging this narrative, and more specifically, the notion that excluded groups are positioned in symmetric and parallel ways to each other. Such a framing of the relationship between the oppressed collapses racial, ethnic, gendered, and sexualized (the list goes on) markers of difference as variations of a universal mechanism of exclusion, and thus cannot engage the particularity of sexual difference. In addition, such a leveling of difference buttresses the view that there are simply two categories to contend with, the included and the excluded, and within each all are positioned equally. Because the matter is simply one of inserting the latter into the former, this view allows for the projection of a future in which total

⁶² Ann D. Gordon (2007), in particular, offers the portrait of Stanton as a tireless pioneer working under "unfavorable conditions," who "never opposed universal suffrage, even when that ideal lost its intellectual and political support" (118).

inclusion will be realized. However, because the expansion of rights is legitimated through an appeal to advancement and progress, woman is incorporated into citizenship by assigning value to her inclusion. As such, what renders “woman” into an intelligible and viable voting member of society is fundamentally qualitative, and rests upon attributing a measurable worth to her contributions in relation to this end. To establish value in this sense, as we have now repeatedly seen, requires a point of reference that designates what is incontrovertibly inferior. Therefore, inclusion is not opposed to exclusion (as liberalism would have it) because the demand for recognition always produces and relies upon the reinscription of another exclusion.

This brings us to the articulation of another fundamental tension that already animated Wollstonecraft’s treatise, and can now be traced through Stanton’s political thought. While the conceptual apparatus of natural rights requires that woman be recognized in terms of her fundamental sameness to man, the teleological logic of civilization through which these rights are legitimated, by contrast, concentrates on the specific difference of woman as the basis for her enfranchisement. Put otherwise, Wollstonecraft and Stanton end up defending women’s rights through an elaboration of what women may (theoretically) contribute towards the achievement of civilizational progress. This means that for the excluded, access to the rights of citizenship is not simply about proving humanity, or even that their inclusion will not constitute an impediment to progress. Rather, the burden is to provide evidence of a net benefit, measured in the units of civilization, that is not redundant with man. It is therefore not surprising that women’s inclusion is made into a matter of capital accumulation, a raw resource to be tapped, exploited and maximized:

There is a large class of citizens, intelligent, refined, virtuous, whose moral power we need to have represented in the government, not only for the nation’s safety, but for the more complete development of the class itself in political, religious, social ideas. As a question of civilization, the enfranchisement of woman is of more vital importance than that of all other classes put together, as her enlightened influence would do for politics and religion what her higher education in the domestic arts has already done for social life. There is more buried wealth in the minds of women in Maine than in all the lumber and fisheries that State can boast. (V: 428)

Woman should be admitted into the realm of politics, the argument goes, because she promises to uplift, enlighten and develop. The underlying thread that continues to weave its way through all of these examples is that the case for expanding the domain of rights

is made by elaborating the potential (but not realized) use value of woman, rather than through a defense of equality as such. Scholars of Stanton's work have identified a shift in focus that took place roughly around the turn of the century, away from appeals to universal natural rights and towards the recuperation of women's specific role and function. While this shift has been explained by recourse to the broader historical context in various ways, most recently Sue Davis ties it to the supposed rise in popularity of what she terms "ascriptivist" ideas at the end of the Civil War. Following Davis' framework, the intellectual climate supporting evolutionary theories of racial difference, as well as the broader traffic of discourses surrounding Anglo-Saxonism and social Darwinism, provides sufficient explanation for Stanton's celebratory claims to women's inherent nature. To return to the opening discussion, this historical approach is limiting at several levels, for one because it again renders sexual and racial difference equivalent, and forecloses any closer attention to their operation by neatly stowing it all away under the heading of ascriptivism. In addition, such a move splits an analysis of race or gender from natural rights, suggesting that they belong to an entirely distinct and altogether different category of ideas. Another possibility for conceptualizing the discourses relating to woman's elevating influence would be to mark it not as a "shift" that is symptomatic of larger social trends, but rather as emerging from the understanding of rights as a means to the end of civilizational attainment. In this reframing, the concept of civilization that lends structure and coherence to human history, as well as a rubric for understanding racialized difference, calls forth an enumeration of woman's potential worth that can only be articulated in terms of her difference from man. As such, the ways in which woman is cast as a "mother of the race," and assigned a moral purity that is deeply enmeshed with whiteness, needs to be seen as part and parcel of the enfranchisement of woman being posed as a "question of civilization."

The consequences of this tethering are significant in that it points to the ways in which liberal rights cannot be disassociated from the consolidation of a transhistorical collectivity of whiteness, as well as a model of progressive human development. Before pursuing this point further, it must also be noted that hinging women's incorporation into citizenship upon her particular uniqueness constrains woman to specific duties and roles, and renders her legible only as wife and mother. Securing the role of woman within the civilizational enterprise, which is the key to her admission as a member of the polity,

therefore results in a strict differentiation of spheres. “The question is often asked why it is that the moral and spiritual progress of the race does not keep pace with its intellectual and spiritual achievements,” writes Stanton. “I would answer, the material and spiritual world belongs specifically to woman, and she is not yet awake to her duty in this realm of thought and action.” By contrast, “the world of trade and commerce, of material wealth, exploration, discovery, invention, belongs specifically to man, and we can look with pride and thankfulness on the wonders he has achieved in the last half century” (V: 144). More than simply the recognition of the dangers implicit in linking essential attributes to sexual difference, what is also taking place is the harnessing of woman’s specific role to shore up the twin concepts of “the race” and civilization. The description of woman’s role in these terms projects a campaign structured around concern for the progress and uplift of the race, and indeed, takes it for granted as the common rallying node that will catapult women’s enfranchisement into a universal rather than “special interest” issue. Stanton’s repeated qualifiers on which women she considers entitled to the vote also arises from the particular ways in which the lines between the masculine and feminine spheres are drawn. As we have seen, the charge of providing moral and spiritual uplift demands the continual positing of a sphere of human relations marked as abject, depraved and debased. When rights are shackled to civilization, as they are in the lineage of women’s rights that Wollstonecraft passed on to Stanton, the case for enfranchisement can ultimately only be an argument for the “best,” the “educated, enlightened,” the “best developed” woman. The division of women into the “best” and the “worst,” coupled with the positing of bourgeois ideals as the embodiment of woman’s nature, is not then a matter of ascriptive ideologies trickling into natural rights. Rather, women’s rights have taken shape through an articulated commitment to the improvement of society defined in terms of civilizational progress, a project that recruits only those suited to be ambassadors of the white race.

Examining how the concept of civilization is woven into the argument for harnessing woman’s “moral power” brings us back to the central tension identified earlier: namely, the continual effacement of individual woman within a larger collective identity. In particular, the invoking of civilization as an objective and universal ambition of humanity provides a secure mooring in the midst of the oscillations that inflect woman. When the contours of woman are hardened through an elaboration of her

specific role and duties, she becomes dangerously distanced from the model of the individual embodied by man. As the chasm between sexual difference and the subject of rights deepens, the category of “civilization” steps in to provide a secure ground that, as the logic of reason goes, is beyond the realm of scrutiny. The raw historical truth of civilization, in other words, conceals the fractures within a framework of thought that can only admit “woman” by consigning her to a space of absolute difference. In that way, civilization links woman’s suffrage to a necessary teleology, thereby removing it from the realm of question by endowing it with the natural weight of human progress. Existing scholarship has largely described the concept of civilization as a model of humanity and of history that (with the progressive hindsight of the present) unfortunately found its way into feminist arguments due to the force of the surrounding discourse, or a frustration with seemingly never-ending setbacks. In Stanton’s texts, however, “woman” requires “civilization” to suture together the split between a group identity and the sovereignty of the individual, that is, to appear as a rights-bearing subject. The contours of woman are thus the contours of civilization itself, a dual inscription that haunts the contention of unity that accompanies any invoking of “women.”

Linking the Vote to the Future of the “the Race”

It is with this broader understanding of the intimate interrelationship between civilization, natural rights, and the concept of a collectivity named “the race” that this reading seeks to revisit what has been variously referred to as Stanton’s racism, anti-immigrant rhetoric and social Darwinism. Although these elements of Stanton’s work have now become a subject of discussion within women’s history after a long period of disciplinary oversight, the study of these issues mostly stops at a simple recognition or acknowledgement of their presence within her body of thought. Although feminist scholars might disagree on whether Stanton’s racism, to use the term in circulation, should be seen as having a bearing upon her stature as one of the “great” figures in the history of feminism, the assumption is that everybody is clear on what this charge of racism refers to, and that it must be publicly admonished. But what precise set of ideas is being identified as emblematic of racism in these conversations? And how might this categorization (yet again) close off further engagement with the ways in which the

production of racial difference cannot be so neatly disaggregated from the greater conceptual apparatus of natural rights? And furthermore, if there is a projected consensus that this aspect of Stanton's thought is objectionable on moral or ethical grounds, what is it exactly that is being called out?

As the segue into these questions, we can recall from earlier that Stanton conceived of suffrage in terms of protection, and the vote as a matter of security. The casting of the ballot, for her, is explicitly articulated as an act of war, and as a weapon to guard against the threat of an unnamed, yet intrinsically violating other. This conception of a collectivity that is under attack is therefore imprinted at every level of the argument, and continually calls forth the naming and circumscribing of entities that pose an affront to the integrity of the whole. Against this backdrop, women's vote gains currency as a defense measure that strengthens and solidifies an endangered majority. The white majority, moreover, is rendered isomorphic with the American nation, as in the following:

“Vice, ignorance and poverty are coming to us from every quarter of the globe; over 50,000 Chinese already on the Pacific slope; but the entering wedge to 400,000,000 behind them, and all the masses must be educated in the rights and duties of self-government...or if left as they are now, to wreck our great experiment of a government of the people, by the people and for the people. It is for the women of the republic, with their growing intelligence, influence and power, to decide what our future shall be” (III: 311).

The specter of a nation inundated and overwhelmed by difference pits women's enfranchisement as an issue of national sovereignty, where rule by “the people” is seen as endangered by the sheer presence of racialized others. In addition to equating sovereignty with racial homogeneity, this narrative also enshrines the “women of the republic” within the contours of whiteness. The extension of the vote to women is conceptualized as an extension of the white national body, a recruiting effort that traffics in the logic of securing a racial majority. This is an understanding of the nation as ethnos, that is, where “the people” are constituted as a racial identity. The anxieties that animate this account can therefore be said to tie into broader questions about the relationship between nationalism and natural rights, and the conflicts that arise between the former's injunction to exclude and the latter's claim to universality. In the passage above, we can continue to trace the ways in which the call for exclusion, and the rhetoric of contamination through which it gets expressed, is programmed into the definition of human nature that appends natural rights. While the foundation of natural rights rests

upon the claim to self-government as inscribed in human nature, the racial other must be educated in this regard. Human nature, to put it simply, does not come naturally to the Chinese. Not only must this otherness be worked upon and molded to express what is already witnessed in the infant (whose position as the origin of the human has already been exposed as inseparable from whiteness), but it threatens and attacks a people that is straining to govern itself and hence be itself.

If Stanton's position on immigration is not tucked away under the auspices of her growing resentment at the marginalization of the women's movement, then further exploration into what imaginings of the nation and of democracy underpin her frequent assaults against a "degraded manhood" are required. Etienne Balibar's approach to the imbrication of racism and nationalism is useful in this regard. In his classic piece, Balibar (1991) argues that racism is structurally necessary to the concept of the nation, for the latter is founded upon the fiction of a people bound together by blood. The claim to a shared racial lineage provides a basis for the unity of the nation through a pure identity that the collectivity can call its own. While in the contemporary rhetoric, as Balibar points out, the appeal to race has been replaced by other terms (notably "culture"), these are still appended to notions of a shared ancestry that conceive of the human as a biological species. The identity of the nation thus requires that it be self-same, which serves to explain the incessant drive for purity that takes the form of excising those "elements" identified as not proper to itself. Because such purity is never fully achieved, the project of expelling difference can only escalate by establishing ever-more markers of "true" belonging. In this sense, the nationalism of Nazism's continually escalating demand for authenticity is not an exceptional example, but rather one that exposes the consequences of making the unity of the nation contingent upon, to use Balibar's phrase, a *fictive ethnicity*. This drive to distill the nation into its purest form is crystallized in the figure of the ideal man, whose force, vitality and robustness stands for the best specimen of the race. The identity of the nation therefore finds its embodiment in a singular individual, evacuated of plurality and the chaos of difference. Given that this ideal is always refracted through an exaggerated masculinity, this is the moment at which, for Balibar, the mutual dependency of racism and sexism is most fully exposed, or in his words, that "racism always presupposes sexism" (49). Stanton's writing offers an opening to further examine the relationship between the attachment to "race" as a

signifier for national identity and sexual difference. At times, “woman” marks the constitutive outside to a social that is seen as consonant with race, and at others she is posed as the very emblem of its (yet unrealized) potential. Moreover, as the delimitation of woman along the lines of the “best” and “most developed” attests, the drive to locate the pure incarnation of the race at the level of the individual is more complexly articulated through sexual difference than Balibar allows. The argument for women’s rights joins with the mission to fix the biological identity of the nation within the body of the exemplary individual by harnessing woman as a specimen capable of representing the race. The best and most refined woman that stands as the object of the suffrage campaign is thus also invested with the capacity to bring meaning and stability to the amorphous collectivity that is “the race.”

At a very broad level, then, it can be said that Stanton’s preoccupation with the damage wreaked by difference, in addition to the elision between a singular (white) ethnicity and the totality of the American nation, has much to do with the structure of nationalism and its fantasy of purity and completeness. What makes women’s rights intelligible as a political project concerned with the continued existence of “the race” is that it takes shape within a horizon defined by the end of totalizing the (white) majority and rendering it identical with the national whole. This enterprise can only view the tolerance of others within its borders as quite literally suicidal, as in the following: “...to blindly insist upon the recognition of every type of brutalized, degraded manhood, must prove suicidal to any government on the footstool, hence we must protest against the suffrage to another man, until enough women are first admitted to the polls to outweigh the dangerous excess of male element already there” (II: 195). In this drive towards the purification of the national body, the meaning of women’s participation in political life is channeled towards the dream of consolidating a majority. The contestations surrounding sexual difference and the possibility of its representation within the categories of citizenship fall out of the picture; instead, women’s vote is about adding numbers to nullify the presence of the other. If woman is figured as a means for closing the gap between the Anglo-Saxon majority and “the people” of the nation, then the campaign of the suffragists needs to be seen as complicit with a set of logics that continue to have devastatingly violent consequences in the contemporary world. Such “predatory majorities,” to use Appadurai’s terminology, project themselves as perpetually

endangered, and see their own survival as predicated upon the extinction of others. In his book *Fear of Small Numbers*, Appadurai locates this dynamic at the core of genocidal projects such as Nazi Germany, Rwanda and Kosovo that are characterized by the seemingly inconceivable perpetration of violence on the part of those living in close proximity as friends and neighbors. If the case for women's vote relies upon these logics, then it is all the more necessary that the roots of this thought be fully disinterred, and the "woman" that accompanies them properly contended with.

Within feminist scholarship, Stanton's attack on black and immigrant men has been treated as a matter of individual psychology, and her anger as the reflection of an individualized emotional state rather than symptomatic of a specific understanding and engagement with difference.⁶³ To situate woman's enfranchisement in relation to the consolidation of a concept of "the race" offers a different avenue into passages such as this, which are often quoted as the culminating point of Stanton's racism:

Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung, who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic, who cannot read the Declaration of Independence or Webster's spelling book, making laws for Lucretia Mott, Ernestine L. Rose, Susan B. Anthony, or Anna E. Dickinson... This Manhood Suffrage is an appalling question, and it would be well for thinking women... to remember that the most ignorant men are ever the most hostile to the equality of women, as they have known her only in slavery and degradation. (Dubois and Smith 196)

The viciousness that inflects Stanton's rhetoric here picks up on an established network of assumptions that already structured Wollstonecraft's treatise, most notably the displacement of patriarchy onto race. As we saw in the last chapter, this linking of racial difference with women's subjugation produces the white civilization as free from sexism at its origin. Thus, inequality is an imposition from the outside, a sign of the contamination of the other that renders the self different from itself. What is at stake, yet again, is the claim to a unified, autonomous and sovereign self. Approached in this light,

⁶³ An emphasis on Stanton's intentions and motivations provides the underlying ground to the debate concerning her racism. On one side, Michele Mitchell contends that Stanton "should be held accountable for a strategic choice that she made of her own volition," that is, employing evolutionary rhetoric and the racial hierarchies to support her cause (146). In opposition to this view, Ann D. Gordon laments the "dimming" of Stanton's "luster" performed by "intellectual and cultural historians focused on racial constructions" (111). She argues that such views ignore "Stanton's core convictions and oversimplify complex problems in her thinking and in American history" (111) and that some "empathy might be extended to [her]" given her status as an oppressed subject (124). Both sides of the conversation, however, remain driven by the end of assigning blame, and frame the question of racism as one about individual accountability. The terms of this conflict therefore conceptualize racism as the expression of a willful and agential subject.

Stanton's relationship to a racialized difference (marked as foreign) can be reframed as the trace of a frenzied attempt to strive towards a self that is complete and whole. Werner Hamacher (1997) puts this most clearly: "The hatred of the foreign is a part of self-hatred, a part of the hatred triggered by the compulsion to be oneself. Xenophobia derives from the fear of oneself, the fear of the violence required for becoming and remaining oneself, for becoming familiar with oneself—an other, something inassimilable and foreign to the point of invisibility and impalpability" (291). The coherency of the self, as well as its collective fulfillment in "the people," relies upon a necessary violence of exclusion, for difference can only be an impediment to the endeavor to represent itself. Woman enters the picture to guard against the onslaught of an inassimilable difference, and thus the question of women's suffrage is staged on the battlefield of a war against a racial other. In this passage, the ideal woman, given the proper name of influential suffragists, stands in for the wrong done by exclusion. In the identification of Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott, amongst others, humanity is embodied in the individual, an equation that is possible only through a scientific understanding of the human that views the particular specimen as substitutable for the whole. In other words, underwriting the circulation of these figures is the logic of ordering, categorization and taxonomy, which establishes greater and lesser degrees of humanity. The wrong that Stanton opposes is not the ramifications of this measuring of humanity, but rather the fact that the fulfillment of the race is not finding its proper embodiment in the individual. Put simply, the race cannot fully represent itself because its best specimens are being left out. It is only proper, then, that the casting of the ballot, a gesture in which the individual lays a claim to the whole, be only undertaken by the "best" examples of woman.

In the later years of her life, Stanton argued for an educational qualification on the right to vote, and devoted entire speeches to defending this position. Feminist scholarship has, once again, described her stance as a disingenuous shift away from a commitment to dismantling institutional barriers to suffrage, or as an unfortunate buckling to the nativist discourse of the period. Given the terms that have been sketched out, however, this elitist constriction regarding eligibility does not appear as a deviation from her understanding of women's suffrage, but rather as the expression of its underlying tenets. In other words, what is significant is precisely that such explicit

delimiting of the proper voting subject is perfectly in line with the ways in which equality is conceived, rather than in contradiction to it. Perhaps the more productive question to explore, then, is how Stanton can perceive such restrictions to be compatible with the claiming of suffrage as a natural right. Anticipating the charge of inconsistency, Stanton argues that requiring demonstrable proof of education is defensible because, in her words, it does not bar suffrage to any one “class.” Exclusion, in other words, only counts if it is names and identifies the individual as a member of a group. As a result, the belief in universal suffrage does not preclude the existence of another set of dictates surrounding the “fitness” of those entrusted with the ballot. This assumption that injustice can only be committed when criteria for judging the individual is premised upon group membership is reproduced in every public injunction not to discriminate on the basis of race, class, sexuality, etc. As long as failure, inadequacy, or “unfitness” is determined on the basis of the individual alone, then no harm has been done and equal rights have been respected. In many ways, this articulates with liberalism’s atomized conception of responsibility, which refuses to recognize historical and structural conditions of inequality. At the same time, Stanton’s rationalization of such exclusion cites her previous articulation of the wrong done to woman. To recall from earlier, Stanton poses women’s exclusion from the voting body as the problem of one class legislating for another, a framing that enables the comparison with slavery and colonialism. In addition to the fact that such a move consolidates an underlying unity to woman through her difference from the colonized and enslaved subject, this renders the recognition of injustice contingent upon the coherency of women as a discrete group. What this ultimately suggests, then, is that the identification of woman as one who has been wronged also carries with it the rationalization for excluding individuals identified as inadequate for democracy.

When placed within the lineage of Mary Wollstonecraft, whose formulation of the problem surrounding women’s condition has been seen to saturate the terms of Stanton’s defense, the shift from “civilization” to “the race” as the object under threat appears particularly striking. If for Wollstonecraft the question of woman was charged with collective rather than individual import by linking it to the imminent loss of Europe’s civilizational status, Stanton binds women’s right to vote to the future coherence of “the race.” Read in conjunction with one another, the substitution of civilization with the notion of a singular race exposes the ways in which the former has always been refracted

through a distinctly racialized identity. Taking this point seriously has wide-ranging implications for a large body of feminist thought that has relied upon civilization, and its related notions of human progress and improvement, as its justificatory ground. In Stanton's body of work, woman traffics between being opined as the greatest danger to its future security, and at other moments, held up as the sole hope for its redemption. Again, the resonances with Wollstonecraft, who similarly positioned woman as both the cause and solution to civilization's downfall, confirm that this conceptualization of women's inequality does not originate with the suffrage movement, but is indebted to a racial imagination that animated anxieties reaching back to the French Revolution. Tracing the movement of "woman" across these two modalities in Stanton's arguments suggests that the identity of "the race" is secured through sexual difference, requiring that woman be at once "inside" its borders while also designating the exterior. Woman provides "the race" with its unifying coherency, and as such, she is also necessary to the positing of civilization as a referent for the Anglo-Saxon people. And yet, the instability generated by this vacillation, and the difficulty of grafting "woman" to any decisive set of terms, continuously risks exposing the artifice of such a collectivity. Woman is thus at once the point around which the notion of a race consonant with the American nation is congealed, as well as its permanent undoing.

In the conceptual frame that Stanton inherits from Wollstonecraft, the need for an intervention regarding women's condition is premised upon a diagnosis of her negative effects on the status of society, measured in the units of continual advancement. Yet again, then, the logic of the argument demands an account of women's inferiority, an account that renders the feminist text indistinguishable from the patriarchal one, or more specifically, reveals its close alliance with the anti-suffrage position. This alignment regarding women's debilitating influence on society, a line of thought that weaves its way from Wollstonecraft through John Stuart Mill to Stanton, produces woman as perpetually incomplete, marked by a stunted development that prevents her true nature from being fully known. Woman is what man has made her to be, what her education has molded her into, and what a dismissal from politics and civic life leaves in its wake. She is everything but herself, and hence a deeply unsettling and unpredictable force. Indeed, in Stanton's descriptions of women's debilitating influence on men, it is possible to sense an anxiety concerning her effect on a far more insidious and ungraspable domain of thought.

While constrained to the home, woman exerts her authority through her ideas: “The direct effect of concentrating all woman’s thoughts and interests on home life intensifies her selfishness and narrows her ideas in every direction, hence she is arbitrary in her views of government, bigoted in religion and exclusive in society; and is ever insidiously infusing her ideas into men by her side” (II: 202). As the embodiment of prejudice, woman subtly “infuses” herself into men, inhibiting the freedom of thought and men’s commitment to equality. Moreover, a focus on the home emerges as the culprit of reactionary thought, and as the site of moral and social degeneracy. The home is thus ushered into the sphere of politics, understood as having a direct bearing upon the ideas that define civic life, at the same time that it is projected as the breeding pond of prejudicial views. All of this points to an emerging trend concerning the need for proof of woman’s debasement as the basis for political interventions. Across both Wollstonecraft and Stanton, the claim for women’s rights is legitimated in the name of social improvement, a formulation that requires woman, and the spheres that are her dominion, to display the very inferiority upon which her exclusion from politics is founded.

In the damage that she wreaks, woman exposes the fragility of civilization and the urgency of guarding it from its own demise. It is her position as a failed subject, then, that brings into being the notion of a society in need of protection. The logic of purity and preservation that Balibar identifies as central to the concept of the nation thus relies upon sexual difference for its mooring. Woman is first projected as an incomplete and deferred subject, and then reclaimed as the lynchpin to the future security of the race. The movement enacted through woman’s degradation and redemption allows for the emergence of this collectivity as a historical actor with its own past and future. This suggests that sexism is not limited to the coding of the ideal (national) specimen as masculine, which is where Balibar leaves the relationship, but rather sustains the problematic of a species under threat that is the mark of modern racism. From the depths of her degradation, then, woman holds together an architecture that defines the end of politics in terms of preservation from decline. As we will see, to think about society as that which must be defended, in Foucault’s words, is inseparable from a racism built upon notions of biological heredity and the reproduction of the species. To make this argument, it is first necessary to examine how, in particular, Stanton narrates women’s degradation. Although Wollstonecraft’s indictment of woman’s vanity and concern for her

corrupting influence on man resonate throughout Stanton's account, what characterizes this new discourse is a preoccupation with deviants defined in the biological sense, including the criminal, the sick, and the mentally insane. The emergence of these characters within Stanton's rhetoric mark a shift towards a bioligico-medical notion of society that is under attack from within, by elements projected to be at odds with the purity of the whole. As in the following, the condition of woman is tied to the proliferation of figures that endanger the very survival of the social order: "Woman's degraded, helpless position is the weak point in our institutions to-day; a disturbing force everywhere, severing family ties, filling our asylums with the deaf, the dumb, the blind, our prisons with criminals, our cities with drunkenness and prostitution, our homes with disease and death" (III: 238). The exaggerated force of this passage, in which woman functions as the origin of disease, criminality, insanity and sexual disorder, reveals how the narrative of her degradation provides a disciplining frame for society's impurities. In her role as mother, moreover, woman reproduces and extends her degeneracy into the future: "The feeble mother brings forth feeble sons, the sad mother those with morbid appetites" (II: 347). In this account of the self-reproducing nature of feebleness lies the dream of eliminating the category of the "lower orders" altogether, a vision that will later congeal into a social movement and, with the hindsight of historical narrativizing, be contained under the heading of eugenics.

The insistence on women's degradation that weaves its way through Wollstonecraft and Stanton suggests that the looming threat of collective decline is critical to the structure of progress, and gives meaning to the concept of equality.⁶⁴ The very possibility of conceiving of humanity in terms of degradation rests upon an understanding of history as the revelation of man's nature, which as we will see in a moment, it itself reliant upon an understanding of the human as species. As Christina Crosby has noted, this idea of universal history presumes a masculine subject and is achieved through a constant process of exclusion, whereby women and racial others must serve as signposts of its constitutive outside. It is thus contradictorily within the

⁶⁴ In her essay "Politics Out of History," Wendy Brown (2001) argues that the unchecked belief in progress that characterized the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, inflecting the thinking of Hegel to Mill to Marx, has now been replaced in the contemporary period with the projection of the golden era of history as existing in times past. While Brown describes this as a shift away from the progress narrative, the writings of Wollstonecraft and Stanton suggest that the fear of degradation has always been a constitutive element of such a teleology.

articulation of skepticism and uncertainty regarding the status of America that ideas about racial difference are encoded, a point that was also forth in relation to Wollstonecraft's lament on Europe's imminent demise. Once again, Crosby's outline of the exclusions that accompany historical man, although generative, makes the same move of casting sexual and racial difference as parallel and interchangeable constructions. In addition, what is lost from view in this critique is the distinction between the human and the animal upon which a progressivist history is built, and through which sexual and racial difference are also fixed and stabilized. The direction of progress, in posing a movement away from a nature that contains the undifferentiated truth of the human-as-animal, must also and at once be degenerative.⁶⁵ The animal is the past to which humanity can never return to and yet one whose clutches it fails to fully disentangle from.⁶⁶ As Derrida (1998) puts it, "progress consists always of taking us closer to animality, while annulling the progress through which we have transgressed animality" (203). At the same time that the animal is the past that must be superceded, the future is conceived as a return to the original truth contained within nature. But this return, to follow Derrida's articulation, is necessarily characterized by difference, a difference that carries the weight of separating the animal from the human. Sexual difference is crucial for staging this line, as we will see, because it rests upon the impossibility of knowing woman in her present determination. As such, woman moves between the animal and the human, and the promise of the former being rejoined in the latter is that of woman becoming herself and no longer an imitation of man.

The division of humanity into two mutually exclusive and opposed sets of values, thoughts and characteristics, and their organization in terms of sexual difference, can now be understood as an essentialism that arises in Stanton's work due to the disciplining frame of betterment and improvement. More specifically, the elaboration of women's unique contributions is called forth by an understanding of politics as intervening into and preventing the degradation of humanity. To that end, Stanton describes woman's degradation as the final tie that binds the human to animality, an articulation that invests women's equality with the potential of eradicating the threat of devolution once and for

⁶⁵ Balibar notes that racist discourses often take shape as inversions of a progress narrative, commenting on the "decadence, degeneracy, and the degradation of national culture, identity and integrity" (55).

⁶⁶ Balibar makes this point in "Racism and Nationalism."

all: “A recognition of the masculine and feminine element in art, science, philosophy, and literature will give new force and zest to life and love and lift the race from the animal plane, where woman’s degradation holds it to-day. In this higher civilization, woman must lead” (Vol II: 627). If woman is the sign of the animal within the human, it is her transformation that can provide proof of man’s evolution. The departure away from nature will be realized when woman no longer appears as she does, and hence the transgression of the animal is also and at once the transgression of woman. At the same time, the feminine is recuperated as the key to civilization, the missing element that keeps the race from exiting the realm of the animal. If woman is the origin and cause of this degradation, then the race can also be rejuvenated through her. As such, woman is both poison and remedy. Through her the race is degraded, and through her, the race will find salvation. Uncovering the secret of woman’s nature, which is also the promise of fixing the truth of sexual difference, is what will finally propel the race into the future. As Stanton says, “woman must lead.”

Although woman is responsible for keeping the race from severing its final ties with the animal, her degradation can only be rectified by coming back to nature. The transcendence of nature is thus achieved through a return to nature, a cycle that undermines the logic of progress at the same time that it serves as its enabling mechanism. “It is a fitting question for society to consider, whether woman’s present condition is in harmony with the laws of nature. It is the most momentous question of the century, for until the true nature and position of woman is understood, all things will be inverted, and discord, disease, and misery be the heritage of the human race” (Vol II: 178). As Stanton articulates it here, the demise of society is perpetuated by woman’s deviation from what nature has prescribed. All the questions surrounding the organization of society are concentrated and displaced onto her, and as such, woman brings order to a chaos of social problems (“discord, disease, misery”) whose origins always exceed the possibility of being fully accounted for. Because social disorder is placed under the sign of woman, every example of deviance and inequality comes to substantiate her degradation. As a result, the absence of the truly feminine is the organizing grid that holds together and contains all impediments to civilizational progress. Woman is both the cause and the solution, providing a clear beginning and end to the teleology of uplift. For the race to be fully human, then, woman must be reformed and brought back to a

pure identity from which she has diverged. But, as with Wollstonecraft, the underlying truth of woman, the ground of her difference from man, is not yet known, and cannot be known because she has never yet been herself. Woman is thus a return to what has never been, a return without an origin, and in this return is contained the unalterable truth of sexual difference, which also substitutes for nature.

What is at stake in this articulation of the problematic is more than the already worn articulation that man as political being is sustained by woman's location within nature. Rather, the point of continuity between Wollstonecraft and Stanton is the insistence upon woman as a subject that is not and has never been known, an absence of meaning that appears necessary to the staging of natural man. In her emptiness, she maintains the truth of nature as something indeterminate, and as that which, while residing in the past, can only be accessed in the future. The space of indeterminacy occupied by woman is thus the possibility of knowing the past in the future, of fulfilling nature's truth within civilization, and of grasping the animal within the human. Woman, to put it otherwise, holds together the oppositions that surround the casting of nature as the ground of man. She is the animal, nature, the past, all that which must be transcended and yet at the same time kept in view, because the definition of the human, civilization, and the future cannot do without them in their midst. Tracing the ways in which woman organizes these dichotomies is necessary to building the larger argument that sexual difference relies upon the concept of "the race" for coherence. As we have already seen, woman and "the race" emerge alongside one another, for the latter is consolidated through the shared plight of women's degradation. Moreover, if what is common to "the race" is the suffering brought about by women's condition, this means that woman is inscribed within its contours. Woman, then, can only refer back to the race, she can only gain coherency as one of its members, albeit an always incomplete one. It can therefore be said that an insurmountable ethnocentrism resides within the claim for women's rights-- insurmountable precisely because the boundaries of woman are rendered coherent through a degradation that also and at once brings "the race" into being. As such, the collective of whiteness that carries the race as its proper name cannot be disarticulated from the conceptual structure that renders woman legible as a subject in need of rights. Another aspect of this ethnocentrism is that woman latches "the race" to humanity, and makes the one congruous with the other. As will become apparent below, the plight of

the race easily slips into that of the human race, and hence the collective that is endangered by women's condition comes to carry the name of the human. As a result, the consequence of this slippage mediated by sexual difference is to delineate the boundaries of the human as that of the (white) race.

Amidst the resonances that bind Wollstonecraft to Stanton in how they conceive of woman as a proper rights-bearing subject, there is also a rupture that takes place in the meanings attached to the social. In many ways, this break is enabled by the recasting of the question of progress in the scientific logic of natural selection. As always, the epistemic shift that is attributed to the figure of Darwin and his theory of evolution can be complicated by looking at its earlier antecedents, for example in the hierarchical understanding of humanity contained within the concept of civilization. Unlike Wollstonecraft, who located the consequences of degradation in the loss of European singularity, and the chaotic possibility of becoming indistinguishable from the other, Stanton hinges her struggle on a biological struggle for existence, a war that is directed towards figures of deviance whose sheer presence threatens the future continuation of the species. The concern over the infiltration of the social body by the fallen and degraded, and the commitment to hygiene that comes along with it, turns on which subjects are adequate to the race. The question of woman's suffrage is thus folded into a larger battle for the preservation of a biological heritage, a battle in which, as Foucault (2003) argues, the state is no longer the enemy, but rather the "protector of the integrity, the superiority and the purity of the race" (80). This transformation in the terrain of battle to that of the biological fundamentally rearticulates the role of the state within the logic of security. As Foucault suggests in his series of lectures titled "Society Must Be Defended," the theme of racial purity that makes its appearance in the nineteenth century gets mobilized to affirm and extend the sovereignty of the state. More specifically, the struggle to preserve the race centralizes the role of the state in policing this purity, and also justifies its encroachments into increasing dimensions of social life. State sovereignty becomes not only contingent upon the maintenance of a racially homogenous populace, but is cast as the prerequisite for the survival of the individual. As a result, this restructuring aligns the interests of the state with the interests of the individual, now defined as nothing but life itself. In a point that often seems to get lost in recent discussions of governmentality, Foucault argues that this regime is explicitly contingent upon the conflation of race with

nation. In the collapse that takes place between national interests and the interests of the race, then, the fight for women's rights becomes about the safeguarding of a filial line that can be claimed as the nation's own, a mission that is nothing short of a struggle against species extinction.

In this new biological understanding of the social, the figures associated with the non-normative, the unproductive, and the abject both demarcate the boundaries of the feminine subject and also stand in for women's (debased) condition. If the meaning of woman is latched to a category of individuals identified as expendable, two specific implications emerge. First, this suggests that "woman" as a subject of politics comes into being alongside a difference that is seen to split the unity of the national body, and hence pose a threat to the future of the polity. Second, the consolidation of women's degradation through these figures takes for granted a category of bodies marked as deviant, a move that closes such a category off from scrutiny and in so doing produces consensus around that which must be expelled. The invoking of women's debasement as the justification for the extension of rights, a formulation that again extends back to Wollstonecraft, thereby cannot be disentangled from the impulse to purify the social. Consequently, the escalating consolidation of groups subjected to vitriolic attack over the span of Stanton's writing is deeply interwoven with an understanding of society as that which must be preserved from decline, an understanding that, as we have seen, is also tied to the drive for racial purity. The state of women's condition thus comes to stand in for the state of the race itself, for her degradation is signaled by the contamination of the whole: "Just as in the subordination of the higher to the grosser nature, man has been robbed of his godlike powers, so in the subordination of woman to man has the whole race been through her degraded" (Vol II: 178). The relation of subordination at once establishes the unity of "woman" and provides the underlying ground to the concept of a singular race. What confirms the existence of this collective, in other words, is nothing but woman's difference from man. Woman holds the race within herself, and in so doing, provides the contours of its identity. In her debasement, she unifies the race; it is through her that the race establishes its coherence. To push this point further, woman's inferiority to man provides meaning to sexual difference which is also and at once figured as the foundational pivot around which the race is constituted. By implication, then, the collapsing of sexual difference with woman's degradation means that the political subject

can only refer to whiteness.

As this reading of Stanton's corpus has attempted to reveal, the claim to women's suffrage has not been made from a position committed to universal rights or, at a very basic level, even the notion that participation in democracy should be made available to all. Over and again, the argument for women's right to vote is defended as a crucial security measure for a society in the process of perpetuating its own disintegration, and faced by the looming threat of an engulfing difference against which the only weapon left is the sheer force of number. While the question of women's suffrage has been narrated as a campaign driven by the ideal of egalitarianism, this chapter has sought to trace how posing sexual equality as a desirable end that will advance the interests of the body politic has always relied upon a series of exclusions, as well as a continual constriction of its boundaries along explicitly racialized lines. Furthermore, the staging of woman as a subject of natural rights, along with the ballot as the confirmation of their possession, carries within it a hierarchy of humanity that latches sexual difference to whiteness. Inheriting the logic of civilizational progress from Wollstonecraft, Stanton ties the significance of the ballot to the sovereignty of "the race," a subtle shift in the conceptual landscape that further aligns the expansion of democratic representation with the totalizing of the white majority. The horizon to which women's suffrage appends itself is therefore one that dreams of eradicating the minority, of rendering the presence of racial difference within the national polity irrelevant to the point of annihilation, of purifying the social once and for all. The lines of continuity that etch their way between Wollstonecraft and Stanton suggest that a deferral to the social and political context cannot contend with the entrenched roots of a conceptualization of women's rights that has perpetually sought to expel difference from its borders. In this sense, the oscillations surrounding sexual difference that animate Stanton's long career not only serve to expose the status of man as the standard of the same, to use Wendy Brown's phrase,⁶⁷ but also track the ways in which racial difference constantly secures the legibility and coherence of woman's every incarnation. The appeal for democratic representation has thus taken shape not only through the reinscription of a taxonomy that positions the perfected specimen of the race as the embodiment of the nation, and therefore the proper bearer of the ballot, but also by designating a category of those whose consent literally does not

⁶⁷ In her essay titled "Suffering the Paradoxes of Rights" (2002).

count, and are therefore expendable as a result. In the fractured lines of Stanton's writings, then, the traces of a eugenic future gain ever more traction. Attending to them is part of the slow labor of disentangling the struggle for women's suffrage from its position as a signpost in the long march towards universal human rights.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Eugenic Equality: Woman's Humanity as Social Evolution

The rediscovery of Charlotte Perkins Gilman as a key literary figure of the twentieth century came on the heels of feminist challenges to the patriarchal foundations of the literary canon during the 1970s. Foregrounding the politics underlying the presumed neutrality of categories such as the “great works” of literature, feminist literary critics worked to dismantle the understanding of the text (epitomized by the New Critics in particular) as a self-contained entity tied to a single, authoritative reading. As feminists brought attention to Gilman’s analysis of the gendered oppression contained within social institutions such as marriage and the nuclear family, a selected sampling of her work (including the short story the “Yellow Wallpaper”) came to occupy a central place within the feminist canon. Within the last decade, a substantial body of scholarship has grappled with the tensions between Gilman’s radical exposure of patriarchal structures and her close alliance with the eugenics movement and its aspirations for a racially pure nation. Despite the substantial focus on Gilman’s racial politics, however, her texts emerge from the ruins of this critical scrutiny as testaments to the complicated relationship between feminism and racism, a relationship that is historical and empirically verified, but never understood as constitutive. As captured in the title of a recent edited volume, *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, the question of her racism, to put it most broadly, gets posed as a conflicted yet ultimately discrete element of her thought.⁶⁸ Picking up the argument from the previous chapters, gender and race are compartmentalized as separate spheres of analysis that each yield their own, unique legacy. Within this frame, Gilman appears as a figure that championed a radical rejection of traditional gender roles at the same time that she marshaled the central tenets of eugenic thinking in order to carve out a singular and necessary position for women within society. The recognition of a “mixed legacy” serves as the endpoint of such an approach, which can be said to traffic in an implicit logic of moral absolution. The act of recognition in itself comes to stand as an appropriate response to the work of contending with how the subject of feminism, and the imagining of what constitutes woman’s equality and woman’s liberation, has in the most fundamental of ways demanded that

⁶⁸ Eds, Catherine Golden and Joanna Zangrando. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000.

others be denied humanity. The “coming to see” that is staged by this body of scholarly work on Gilman thus ultimately poses racism as a question to be answered through public condemnation.⁶⁹ As a result, the scholar who announces (and at once denounces) this racism is consolidated as a properly moral subject, and the task of reading becomes that of demonstrating an ability to accurately identify and unearth the ongoing vestiges of racialized structures of knowledge.

One way of challenging the trajectory of progress that remains operative in this mode of reading, as the prior chapters on Wollstonecraft and Stanton have attempted to suggest, is to trace how the staging of “woman” as a coherent category must be constantly undertaken and repeated anew, with each iteration always constituted through difference. To take this point of entry into Gilman’s work offers a different agenda for reading: not one that is guided by what it may reveal about the eugenics movement or the particular brand of xenophobia that she advocated, but rather one that attends to the ways in which the closure of woman relies upon a passage through racial difference. In this sense, the rampant anxiety about the reproduction of the “fit” and the contamination of the national “stock” that courses throughout her corpus of writings can be recast as endemic to an understanding of sexual difference, and the scripting of woman’s oppression and its solution that accompanies it. Unlike the empiricist frames that maintain the promise of a feminism that is pure at its origins, this engagement with Gilman’s evolutionary thinking raises the specter of “woman” as a category that is itself implicated and contingent upon the consolidation of a racial taxonomy that identifies (some) difference as having no productive value to society. Undertaking this work, as this chapter argues, has the implication of dismantling the rigid boundaries that conventionally situate eugenic thinking within the enclosure of a specific geography, time period, and constellation of national politics. The preceding readings of Wollstonecraft and Stanton have laid the groundwork for the claim made here, which put most forcefully, contends that the call to eliminate the inferior that has been seen as the particular pathology of the eugenics movement, effectively the dream of turning man into the sovereign author of evolutionary change, is the condition of possibility for woman’s

⁶⁹ It is important to note that these comments are directed towards the way in which this body of critical scholarship as a whole is situated in relation to the discipline and the function that it serves in terms of the anxieties surrounding the institutionalization of a feminist canon. The work undertaken within specific readings, in other words, exceeds these terms.

emergence as a subject of equality within Gilman's work.

In a provocative essay that makes the rare move of identifying Gilman's claim to woman's abstract equality as one that emerges through the framework of eugenics, Asha Nadkarni (2006) locates a convergence in feminist deployments of eugenic thought within the US and India in the early twentieth century. Coining the phrase "eugenic feminism" to mark the ways in which this logic is internal to feminist politics, she defines it as:

"...a self-purifying and self-perfecting rhetoric that works to create a feminist subject who, free of race, guarantees the reproduction of the sovereign nation. In so doing, eugenic feminism comes to depend on race—in the form of phantom and figural racial others—to shape an identity in negative terms, defining what a feminist subject must avoid incorporating in order to advance the nation as a whole." (221)

Taking Nadkarni's definition as a point of departure, the questions posed by this chapter are the following: what is the precise relationship between the two terms, that is "eugenic" and "feminism," that Nadkarni joins together? Does this compound phrase mark an intersection of two discrete ideologies, and hence one that can be implicitly disaggregated? In other words, what of feminism is left behind when eugenic is taken away as a qualifier? What would it take to de-link them? And what, then, does a feminism without eugenics look like?

In order to chart the contours of this relationship, an undertaking that is driven by the hope of disentangling feminism from its commitments to a perfected—because racially purified—humanity, this chapter considers several key texts in Gilman's vast body of works. A prolific writer and lecturer, Gilman experimented across literary genres to articulate the tenets of her social critique. In addition to novels and short stories, Gilman produced a series of book-length treatises and over one thousand essays, many of which were published in her own journal, *The Forerunner*, which ran from 1906-1916. In what has been popularly cast as the ultimate sign of her devotion to the achievement of a fully maximized society, Gilman committed suicide in the face of a spreading cancer, attaching the following note to the last page of her autobiographical manuscript: "...when all usefulness is over, when one is assured of unavoidable and imminent death, it is the simplest of human rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and horrible one...I have preferred chloroform to cancer." Although Gilman is clearly not invoking the contemporary juridical notion of human rights, I include this passage because it

contains the very association of human life with “usefulness” and productivity that will be developed in the final chapter. In other words, the placement of human rights within a larger logic of social value is precisely what the appeal to universal women’s rights inherits from this lineage. This chapter focuses on two of Gilman’s political manifestos, *Women and Economics: a Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898) along with *The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture* (1911), as well as a selection of her short essays and utopian novella *Herland*, to contend with how the attempt to settle the meaning of sexual difference opens onto and calls forth the eugenic imagining of a white future.

Extricating the Human from Sexual Difference

As the overarching rubric of Gilman’s thought, the problem of women’s inequality is conceived as an effect of the conflation of the masculine with the human. By consequence, all that is marked as “feminine” has been devalued, and banished to merely propping up and serving the fulfillment of man. The existing arrangement of the social, including men and women’s relative position and function, reflects this privileging of masculine values and characteristics. In order to reform the “androcentric world” and the social ills that have resulted from it, Gilman sets out to extract the human from the categories of masculinity and femininity, and to determine with finality what is proper to each. As it stands, women are defined entirely by sexual difference, while men are seen to be constituted both by masculinity and something which exceeds it—that is, the human. To rectify the ways in which man has had sole claim upon humanity, Gilman argues that these three spheres need to be correctly demarcated and the institutions of society changed accordingly: “...what we have all this time called “masculine” and admired as such, was in large part human, and should be applied to both sexes; that which we have called “feminine” and condemned, was also largely human and applicable to both” (MMW 22). What is human, Gilman contends, is that which traverses masculinity and femininity, or put otherwise, what is held in common. As a result, the discernment of that which is properly human presupposes the difference of the masculine from the feminine. Within Gilman’s scheme, the human is derivative of and only comes after the fact of sexual difference. What is significant about this imagining is that masculinity and

femininity are not positioned under the umbrella of the human, a basic assumption that animates Wollstonecraft and Stanton's respective undertakings to expand the category of the individual and the citizen to include woman. Rather than pulling in the previously expelled domain of the feminine into the boundaries of a common humanity, Gilman conceives of the relationship altogether differently. In most basic terms, this is not an argument for equality understood as woman's ability to stand in for man, even if the course of her logic leads her to reject the Victorian model of sex differentiation. In fact, Gilman's critique of dominant ideals of femininity and woman's positioning as sexualized subjects has too often been glossed as a straight-forward rejection of gender roles, a summary that evades the conflicting meanings that are played out on the terrain of sexual difference. Perhaps for reasons not unrelated to her vocal critique of the limitations of political enfranchisement, she instead poses masculinity and femininity as spheres that are distinct and separable from the human. But if it does not belong within the confines of the human, what exactly is the status of sexual difference? And what is the remnant that exceeds both masculinity and femininity, and provides a unifying ground to the category of humanity?

Given that Gilman's project is premised upon the notion that the inequality between men and women draws from a misidentification of the content of these spheres, it can be said that a fundamental will to truth underlies her account of women's subjugation. This will to truth seeks to establish the "real" content of sexual difference, which as in earlier articulations, projects a pure origin from which society has strayed, a prior moment in which masculinity and femininity reside in an undifferentiated and uncontaminated state. The other set of questions that arises, then, is how can this "truth" of sexual difference, a truth that is necessary for women's emancipation, be found? If the social world is riven with falsehoods that serve to reinforce the interests of an androcentric culture, what sites can be trusted to hold the key to the human? Throughout Gilman's writings, it is the animal that holds the content of this truth, and the proper meaning of masculinity and femininity along with it. As a case in point, the first chapter of the *Man-Made World*, appropriately titled "As to Humanness," opens with an exploration of how the distinctiveness of the sheep is independent from sex, or any difference that may exist between the male and female of the species. What is masculine, Gilman contends, transcends species: "to butt—to strut—to make noise—all for love's

sake; these acts are common to the male (MMW 13).” The particularity of the sheep, or that which sets it apart from other animals, requires a bracketing of sexual difference. This same thinking has not been applied to the human as species, where the only difference that is given attention is precisely that of sex. As a result, the specificity of the human, according to Gilman, has not been adequately thought, and this failure to account for human-ness has enabled androcentrism.

From the very outset, the figure of the animal satisfies several functions that are crucial to Gilman’s conceptual frame. First, the animal is that which requires no interpretation, for knowledge of it does not pass through the corrupting lens of culture that likewise distorts the ability to know the original meaning of (human) femininity. The animal is therefore staged as the possibility of an unmediated access to the truth of nature, a conduit through which it is laid bare for all to see. In this example, the behavior of male animals reveals for Gilman that competition is an essential masculine characteristic, one that therefore belongs to the order of sexual difference and not of humanity. Along with contemporary evolutionary biologists that make the same gesture of turning to the animal to explain human behavior, the narratives that are drawn upon to render the object legible are denied and then concealed altogether. The model of culture as that which generates and traffics “false” understandings of sexual difference is accompanied by nature as the site where the truth of the human can be grasped without the interference of any mediating frames.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the animal as the location of uncorrupted meaning allows for the concept of human-ness to be discussed in terms of a quantifiable set of characteristics. It does not take long in Gilman’s book for the explicit measuring of relative levels of humanity to take place: “The nomad, living on cattle as ants live on theirs, is less human than the farmer, raising food by intelligently applied labor; and the extension of trade and commerce, from mere village market-places to the world-exchanges of today, is an extension of human-ness as well” (MMW 16). Although positivist biologists conceptualize the turn to the animal as a democratizing gesture that affirms the universality of the human, Gilman’s text reveals that such a framework opens the conceptual space for thinking the human in terms of degree. As a result, the condition

⁷⁰ This point has implications for feminist debates concerning the distinction between sex and gender. As Judith Butler (1999) has also suggested, the positing of a difference between these terms relies upon an uninterrogated concept of nature as having a privileged relationship to truth.

of being human is conceived not in terms of its universality, but rather as a quality that is more fully expressed in some than others. Human-ness is not revealed by individuals, in other words, but circulates as a set of criteria through which specific “cases” can be evaluated and enumerated. At a most basic level, then, the appeal for a change in women’s condition relies upon the possibility of conceptualizing humanity as something which one can more and less embody. From the vantage point of the present, in which the twin logics of human rights and political correctness have made it basically inconceivable to speak of relative levels of humanity, what is striking about Gilman’s discussion is that the quality of being human is not something that is taken for granted. Being human is contingent upon displaying the appropriate characteristics and commitment to the objectives of civilization. As a result, human-ness can be gained and lost, inserted within the logic of a comparison, and abstracted into an ideal that casts some as its failure. Overall, the human for Gilman demands proof and relevant evidence to make its case. Human-ness is thus always professed in the mode of an evaluative judgment.

If the move of extricating the human from masculinity and femininity is one that relies upon the animal as its organizing ground, it also brings with it the concept of human-ness as a system of measurement. Indeed, the crux of Gilman’s argument in *Man-Made World*, and one that can be traced across her greater corpus of work, is that woman in her present condition is less human than man, a state that society and its aspirations for civilization suffer from as a result. Woman is therefore constituted as a difference of humanity, a stunted and incomplete incarnation that is in need of further development, an equation that is now emerging as a central organizing trope that gives meaning to the problem of sexual difference. In the schematic that results from Gilman’s description of women’s subordination, masculinity and femininity are posed as mutually exclusive terms whose meaning derives from their opposition to one another, while the human circulates as a third term that is in search of an anchor to render it coherent. Racial difference satisfies this function by providing a point of origin for the scale of humanity to rest upon: “That degree of brain development which gives us the human mind is a clear distinction of race. The savage who can count to a hundred is more human than the savage who can count to ten” (MMW 15). Unlike sexual difference that can be reordered to better express the human, racial difference is fixed in its alterity. No

matter how high the savage can count, in other words, he still does not belong to the category of the human. The positing of woman's relationship to the human as a flexible one therefore relies upon the denial of humanity to the savage. While woman can be made human with the appropriate social reforms, the savage remains enclosed within the confines of a category that does not carry such an opening. This is because race provides the overarching schema for thinking the human in terms of measured degrees, meaning that the positing of a difference of humanity between woman and man necessarily makes recourse to the immutable ground of race. Quite simply, it is because race is there as proof that human-ness necessarily varies that woman can appear as lacking full humanity. In this sense, the inhumanity of the savage, a truth that is incontrovertibly manifested in nature, serves as the interpretive frame for thinking the problem of women's inequality. While Gilman's project in positing women's subordination as a problem of relative humanity is ultimately to restore woman's ties to the human, this formulation employs a logic of race to redefine the masculine and the feminine as true embodiments of human-ness. As a result, the condition of woman appears as is in need of attention precisely because it is analogous to the savage.

So how, then, does Gilman define the specificity of the human, this quality that woman supposedly lacks, and that man has confused with himself? In an early lecture titled "Human Nature," Gilman lays claim to a willful agency as that which separates the human from the animal:

"Natural conditions work *upon* the other animals—they work *through* man... *We create conditions and they react upon us.* We can find no physical or mental trait in the lower animals which their natural environment does not account for. We find in man the preponderance of his nature accounted for, not by his natural environment—but by his *Human Environment*—He is what he is because of what he has done!" (Ceclair 45)

This is the model of man as the sovereign author of his destiny, whose actions are the emanation of his will and their effects fully under his command. Unlike the animal who is determined by nature, the truth of the human resides entirely within himself. The human is therefore constituted as fully self-referential, the conditions that surround him are of his own creation and his environment is the effect of his actions. While an understanding of the animal requires attention to context and the influences through which they are shaped, the human, by contrast, is the origin and endpoint of knowledge about himself. As will become apparent in Gilman's later writings, the capacity to bring

a defined future into being provides the opening for the eugenic vision of disciplining reproduction as a means to this end. Along these lines, Gilman argues that what has been labeled “instinct” is simply the repetition of previous actions, and therefore can also be subject to change through the application of the will (Ceplair 46). Her rejection of instinct as an explanation for human nature supports the casting of man as radically unfettered, and therefore not bound by any prior inheritance. Gilman turns to the animal, however, to demonstrate this point. Comparing the difference in supposed instinct between a wild and tame dog, she notes: “Who gave the dog what we now call his “*nature*”—faithful, obedient, self-sacrificing? Why *we* did... We have developed those instincts by making the creature perform the action whose repetition formed the instinct” (Ceplair 46). It is necessary to pass through the animal, then, to articulate the truth of the human. Indeed, the animal reveals that the social ills suffered by man (in particular, “disease and crime”) are not the result of human nature, but rather the failure to break out of a cycle of repetition: “doing what we are told and what our fathers did before us” (Ceplair 47). The mark of a conscious will is thus to be found in the liberation from the past, in the shedding of any ties to what came before. At the same time, the proof that the human is not determined by the conditions that precede him, but rather acts upon them, is demonstrated through the fact that his actions are informed by the past: “We do not have to act from immediate pressure of circumstance; we act, if we choose, from *remembered* circumstance or *foreseen* circumstance” (Ceplair 47). What all of this suggests is that the premise of an absolute difference between the human and the animal, a distinction that orders the terms of Gilman’s account of women’s subordination, establishes itself upon a set of additional oppositions that cannot be sustained. To fulfill the unbounded potentiality of the human, any notion of an inherited past must be relinquished, at the same time that it is only through a remembering of this past that consciousness manifests itself. Similarly, human nature, while defined in opposition to the animal, can only be accessed through the animal. And furthermore, as we will now see, this entire network of terms is configured through the figure of the savage.

The relationship between human nature and instinct is a fundamental one, for it holds within it the question of whether meaning precedes and determines individuals. In many ways, the problem that Gilman grapples with is how to render sexual difference commensurable with the notion of human nature that is defined by its lack of inherited

qualities. If the nature of the human is fully accounted for by an environment of his own creation, where then does the origin and truth of sexual difference reside? In other words, the character that imposes itself on individuals by virtue of their masculinity and femininity conflicts in a basic way with this model of the fully autonomous human. In *Women and Economics*, Gilman's larger argument concerning the need for social and institutional oversight in relation to mothering (a topic that will be returned to later) brings her to the concept of the maternal instinct. In the domain of the animal, Gilman begins, this instinct is "at its height, and works well." She continues: "Among savages, still incapable of much intellectual development, instinct holds large place. The mother beast can and does take all the care of her young by instinct; the mother savage, nearly all, supplemented by the tribal traditions, the educative influences of association, and some direct instruction" (114). The savage, regulated by instinct, thus remains bound to the terrain of the animal. The "human creature," by contrast, is endowed with a "cultivated intelligence and will" that acts upon the instincts and transforms them to meet the requirements of progress (115). Several implications can be drawn from this passage. First, the human as a sovereign agent is consolidated through the savage who stands for the subjugation to instinct that exceeds the animal. Although "supplemented" by the presence of social structures, the actions of the savage cannot fully be accounted for by a self-conscious interest. The positing of a subject that is completely freed from the grips of instinct, or in other words, that is endowed with a self-present will, is thus articulated through the register of racial difference. The difference between instinct and "cultivated intelligence," in other words, is that of race. Second, as the following discussion will attempt to suggest, the figure of the savage as both within and beyond the category of the animal is crucial to Gilman's staging of woman. More specifically, woman is mapped onto the difference of the savage, whose positioning outside the human is precisely the very grounds of her access to it. As long as woman fails to relinquish the maternal instinct, and continues to assume that she is innately equipped with the ability to fulfill the responsibilities associated with child-rearing, then she will remain outside the boundaries of the human. Given her failure to exhibit the fundamental characteristics of the human, then, woman's grasp on this category is secured through her difference from an other who can only ever harbor "supplements" to instinct.

Having established the progression of humanity as the gradual supplanting of

instinct with conscious will, Gilman turns to situate the condition of women within these terms. The difference of woman, according to the thesis of *Women and Economics*, is the result of being denied the possibility of such advancement. As such, woman does not have the “developed intelligence of man” nor control over her will (Ceplair 115). By consequence, the “human female,” in Gilman’s terms, has “maintained the rudimentary forces of instinct to the present day,” a fact that has particularly detrimental effects on her capacity for mothering (Ceplair 115). Like the savage, all that woman has to offer her children is “brute instinct” (Ceplair 115). In what is by now familiar terms, woman’s resonance with the condition of the savage provides the impetus for transforming her state of subjection. More largely, however, the attributes of the savage sketched out before serve as the interpretive frame for conceptualizing women’s condition and the danger associated with it. The instinct-driven savage who remains perpetually beyond the grasp of a fulfilled humanity, a figure that brings coherence to the logic of being “less than” human, is the ground upon which woman is then inscribed. The difference between the “mother savage” and the “human female” can therefore be understood as structurally necessary for keeping the category of the human open to woman. What is significant about these terms is that they reveal the ways in which “woman” cannot appear under the sign of the savage, but is constituted alongside and in parallel. With the savage, like the animal, sexual difference is bound to maternity. The larger point to return to is that the consolidation of “woman” within a framework that distinguishes between the masculine, the feminine and the human, depends upon the production of racial difference. As such, the exclusions that enable its formation cannot be remedied by pluralizing “woman” into “women,” a move that has often served as the response to the ways in which the circulation of “woman” as an abstract category is predicated upon an unacknowledged whiteness. As Denise Riley (1988) points out, substituting a collectivity (women) in the place of the singular (woman) does not address how this collectivity gains meaning, given that it still presupposes an underlying ground to the group. The tensions that erupt in Gilman’s text suggest that switching to an additive model does not contend with the fundamental ethnocentrism of the category “woman,” for the savage is structurally necessary to drawing the boundaries of the feminine and articulating its relationship to the human.

Staging “Woman” as a Valuable Member of Society

The quality of “human-ness” occupies a tenuous position in Gilman’s frame as the common that unites the masculine and the feminine and at the same time places both of these terms in a terrain beyond the human, as has been argued thus far, also gains meaning through a series of oppositions that are held in place by the savage. As we have seen, the human that is surrounded by an environment entirely of his own making, wielding absolute control over what surrounds him and all that will come into being, produces as its difference the racialized subject that is governed by instinct. In this sense, the human is first constituted as entirely self-enclosed, sealed off and unchanged by what is exterior to him. At the same time, however, the human as individual is also produced as distinct from the savage specifically in terms of the fact that the consciousness of himself is bound to his relationship to others. Echoing the model put forth by her predecessors, Gilman’s account of women’s subjection takes the designation of the proper relationship between the individual and society as its starting point, and then proceeds by documenting the negative consequences that ensue from the failure to include woman within this arrangement. In an unpublished article detailing her understanding of social evolution, Gilman takes the “physical organism” as the model for society, describing the relationship between the different cells and their functioning in terms of the whole as a template for the role of the individual within the collective: “in the evolution of the physical organism individual cells are drawn into relationship for their common advantage, become fixed and specialized in physical functions and develop group-consciousness governing conduct for the benefit of the organism” (303). The “common advantage” that underlies the activity of each cell is the sheer survival of the organism, in other words, the common that is shared is life itself. Taking the “organism” as the point of comparison therefore has the implication of posing the unity of society as a common struggle for existence. The biological frame which approaches its objects of study, whether that be the individual organism or the “ecosystem” writ large, as composed of constituent parts driven by the end of reproducing life, cannot tolerate deviation from this order. Anomalies, in the sense of those who fail to match these criteria, do not cause a reevaluation of the system, but instead become signs of the inhuman. What is “for the benefit of the organism” is not a matter of interpretation when life itself is in question,

and hence the “group consciousness” modeled by the cellular level is consensus regarding survival. When applied to society, then, those individuals who diverge from the common can only be opposed to the continuation of life. The achievement of such “group consciousness,” however, is not to be confused with “instinct,” for it is the result of an extended evolutionary process: “...the stuff of which society is being made was in the scattered loose-knit hordes of savages, from which all social forms have risen. They had only the group consciousness of a physical family, enlarging to a tribe...social evolution has brought us from this to the large close-knit powerful bodies we call national” (Ceplair 305). The savage, once more, serves as the ground for what is claimed as the mark of the human. Lacking the concept of the collective that is evidenced even in the most basic unit of life, the cell, the savage is thus denied the possibility of society.

To take a step back, the argument that is being developed across Wollstonecraft, Stanton and now Gilman suggests that the demand for change regarding women’s condition has been articulated in respect to a social, consolidated in each of these cases through figures of racial difference that are ejected from the boundaries of this collectivity and consequently the category of the human altogether. As a result, the appeal to the savage in Gilman’s work can be read as the very condition of possibility for the articulation of “woman” that emerges from it. The racial logic that is inscribed within this understanding of the interrelationship between the spheres of the human, the masculine and the feminine, is thus implicated in a broader network of thinking that must be systematically unraveled to fully contend with the call for a eugenic future that results. In particular, if the consciousness of what is “good for society” takes as its origin an other whose vision of the collective to which he belongs cannot expand beyond the family or the tribe, then it is bound to a way of thinking that denies humanity to this other: “‘Humanity’ is being developed among us through social evolution, and some of the wasteful experiments of successive cultures have shown far more progress than others, are, so to speak, more human. The whole process is similar to those of physical evolution, the same wide variation of types, the repeated failures, the partial successes, and the grad[ual] appearance of more competent bodies, and of higher intelligence” (306). The notion of a humanity that has yet to be reached and that is still in process underwrites the narrative of evolution that allows sexual difference to be considered, in parallel ways, as open to transformation and change. But this humanity that serves as the

horizon towards which social evolution is reaching drags along with it the remnants of its failures, whose existence serve as testament to the concept of a quantifiable humanity, and furthermore, as a warning that belonging to the human is an achievement that must be merited. In the teleology that accompanies the articulation of society as group of individuals acting for the common good, an articulation that is at the center of canonical political theory, “variation of types” stand as failed experiments, and thus waste that must be cast aside. Difference, in other words, is the useless, albeit necessary product of evolution, the mark of other cultures’ doomed efforts at humanity. It is significant to note the appearance of “culture,” a concept that was notably absent in both Wollstonecraft and Stanton who posed “civilization” as a flexible category that was at the same time always already closed off to racial difference. In this sense, the invoking of “culture” in the plural and to refer to the other constitutes a significant departure from their previous framework. The following statement, in light of this, contains the shadow of the other that is always present within this staging of humanity: “social evolution is easier to understand than physical, because its range is so short, comparatively, its protoplasm of scattered savagery is still observable, as in the Bushmen of Africa” (Ceplair 306). However, as the work of tracing these constellation of concepts has so far suggested, the “Bushman of Africa” cannot access the social, and thus cannot be the subjects of social evolution. Perhaps, then, the figure of race also unravels the initial distinction between social and physical evolution, a distinction that in Gilman’s work renders the human distinct from the undifferentiated mass of “living organisms.”

So far, then, the human for Gilman possesses a collective consciousness whereby individuals understand themselves as component parts of a larger unity. Mapped onto the biological description of what enables the functioning of “life” in an organism, Gilman’s model of the social demands consensus on the part of its members in relation to this end, which is defined as “humanity” itself. Furthermore, the condition for the existence of society, like the condition for the existence of the organism, is precisely a commitment on the part of each constitutive element to a notion of the “good” that encompasses the whole. And once again, this unity of purpose is posed in the language of survival, a consent generated in the name of the collective that represents itself as a singular humanity. The model of the singular organism therefore provides the conceptual frame for thinking humanity as a singular entity, even though what is being negotiated is

precisely the individual's relationship to others. The establishment of this unity, which is also the sign of the human, derives its meaning in opposition to the savage, specified in the above as the "Bushmen of Africa," who is incapable of envisioning any collective unit greater than the tribe, and hence cannot contribute to the project of social evolution. The subject that can position himself in relation to a broader humanity, which is also and at once the prerequisite for belonging to such a humanity, is therefore constituted through race. Put otherwise, humanity derives its meaning from the individual's commitment to the advancement of a collective society, a formulation that takes the racial other as the sign of a difference that cannot grasp this abstraction. In particular, as we saw above, the savage is denied the access to humanity because of an inability to count. Humanity, in this staging, is thus constituted as a sum, an abstraction that is composed through a count, and consequently can be subjected to enumeration and measure. To be human, then, is to understand oneself as a number within a potentially infinite sum. In conclusion, Gilman's humanity is ultimately premised upon a logic of number, where the savage does not count and cannot be counted.

If the abstract category of the human gains meaning through the notion of a collective that is itself consolidated through an exclusion that is given the form of racial difference, it is significant that the social in question comes to be referred to as "the race" in Gilman's writings. Tracing the collapse between the collective in which the question of humanity is encased and the designation of it as a "race" suggests another level at which the specter of racial difference binds together and circumscribes the contours of society. The movement from the human to the collective to "the race" can be found in the lines of her speech on the Labor Movement, where she begins from the now familiar metaphor of the body: "The combined efforts of all parts of the body is in order that the body may thrive, and so the parts thrive also. The combined efforts of all men is in order that the race may thrive, and so the men may thrive also...The trouble with the body politic is lack of common consciousness...it is beneath the vast, intelligent body of humanity to waste energy in wincing and whining under its disease...(Ceplair 73)." The first point to be noted is that the "problem" with the current state of society, or what is being identified as the obstacle to its evolution, is precisely the characteristic accorded to the savage. As the passage concludes, the lack of a common consciousness is defined as not proper or adequate to humanity, for it deviates from the model provided by the body.

The “intelligent body of humanity” whose mapping onto the physical body produces it as a unified and unitary entity, however, is conflated in the course of the paragraph with “the race.” The subject whose ability to thrive is in danger, then, is a humanity demarcated as the (white) race. As in the case of Stanton’s recurring slippage from civilization to “the race,” these resonances with Gilman’s text suggest that articulating the need for redressing inequality by an appeal to the state of the social can only produce whiteness as its unifying ground. Following the articulation of women’s inequality in relation to this problematic across a series of texts, from Wollstonecraft to Stanton to Gilman, ultimately gestures towards the necessary racism that is its condition of possibility. In other words, political interventions directed towards the social in the name of its proper fulfillment are always implicated in consolidating the social as one bound together by race. What is particular to Gilman, and the antecedents of which have already been tracked in Stanton, is the foregrounding of an explicitly biological definition of society. Over the course of Stanton’s career, as we saw in the last chapter, the notion of a society-as-species that is under threat of (biological) contamination took increasing prominence as the rationale for women’s enfranchisement.

By that token, Gilman opens this same lecture with Herbert Spencer’s definition of evolution as progress from “indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to definite, coherent, heterogeneity, by a series of differentiations” (Ceplair 62). She continues, “The conception of society as an organism, with the individual man merely as a cell in the structure, is essential to the understanding of any human problem” (Ceplair 62). A set of fraught tensions emerges from this articulation, beginning with the strange correlation of homogeneity with incoherence. The direction of progress, following this summary of Spencer, is from singularity to multiplicity, or the self-identical to difference. Characterizing the trajectory in this way allows Gilman to build her argument concerning the specialization of labor, which will be explored in more detail shortly. The opposition between homogeneity and heterogeneity, however, is once again given meaning by recourse to the savage: “Man in his savage state was in a condition of indefinite, incoherent homogeneity. The individual savages were indefinite—unspecialized—one was as good as another” (Ceplair 63). The savage is therefore fundamentally interchangeable, and lacking any distinguishing particularity, can only be the repetition of any other. The notion of the individual occupying a singular position in respect to

society, and as contributing something that is irreducibly distinct and non-transferable, also takes racial difference as its ground. Gilman puts this most succinctly in the following: "...split up a savage nation, geographically, and the pieces could thrive and grow like the fragments of a zo-ophyte—one part of the race was as good as another" (Ceplair 63). As such, the specter of the individual as fully self-sufficient, as whole and complete onto itself, is cast as an anterior state, the mark of the savage. Of course, these are the very attributes of the sovereign, willful subject, and the claim to man's difference from the animal: "The peculiarity of man's position in this respect is that he has a separate consciousness, a separate will. This gives him an immeasurable advantage over lower forms of life" (Ceplair 62). The opposition that anchors Gilman's ability to project a shared ground to the human, and that lends it coherence outside the terms of sexual difference, thus begins to deconstitute itself. And this unraveling is brought about by the figure of the savage who cannot be contained within any stable set of frames, and whose meaning constantly eludes attempts to endow it with a stable foundation. The savage continually lurks within all of the concepts that are brought forth to render the progress of the (white) race intelligible, as well the place of the individual within society.

At the broadest level, then, the savage is incapable of society precisely because he is constituted as fully autonomous and discrete. As a result of this absolute sovereignty, the savage can bear no relationship to a larger collective, and thus loses the possibility of singularity altogether. What is transferred onto the figure of race, then, is the paradox implicit within the self-referential subject. Sovereignty and autonomy, which are the source of the individual's uniqueness, also carry the danger of rendering the individual into a mere repetition, completely interchangeable with any other. Pushing this point farther, when the meaning of the self derives only from itself, the subject becomes literally expendable, for he bears no relation to that which is outside of himself. Unmoored from any necessary association to others, the individual stands stripped of all accountability to the concept of a multitude, and vice versa. The savage thus embodies what the sovereign subject must repress: to lose relationality is to be condemned to death. In contrast, the civilized subject only has meaning in relation to the whole, and cannot be abstracted from the collective to which he belongs. By consequence, the mark of civilization is to be subordinated to the social, such that the individual no longer has any independent meaning. Gilman continues: "The individual is specialized to such an extent

as to be unable to exist without the social body. We cohere by a thousand ties...and we are heterogeneous to an extent beyond the highest comprehension of our parent savage” (63). The civilized man, as the argument goes, is incapable of surviving on his own, and hence his sheer existence is contingent upon the many relationships that bind him to the social. So how is the premise of sovereignty, that which secures the basis for freedom, retained within such a framework? And if the individual is nothing but his relationship to the social body, what becomes of individuality? As it turns out, this tension between individual autonomy and belonging to the social resonate with the terms that are put forth to describe woman’s relationship to man. In addition to structuring the difference between the savage and the civilized, therefore, what is at stake is also the staging of sexual difference. The similarities that unite these twin oppositions reveal the ways in which sexual difference is structured upon, and also lends meaning to, the separation of the civilized from its others. For Gilman, woman is defined as the condition of having no independent meaning outside of a relationship to man. This relationship of dependence is ultimately the source of her positioning outside of humanity, as we will see more clearly further along. But what is important to note at this juncture of the argument is that the conflict that arises between the unitary subject endowed with a will and a consciousness that is his own and the individual that is constituted as a member of society is circuited through racial difference in ways that bind woman to the savage. Like the savage, woman has yet to attain the level of humanity required for sociality; however, it is also and at once her difference from the racialized subject that enables her inclusion to be taken for granted. Put simply, the contrast with the savage, who occupies a parallel but separate category outside the boundaries of society, is what allows woman to appear as always already residing within this collective, despite the vagaries of her current state.

Characterized as a movement from uniformity to differentiation, the direction of evolution in Gilman’s writings takes specialization as the defining feature of civilized man. The mark of progress, as we have seen up to this point, is that the individual’s contribution to society has no value independent of its placement within the larger assemblage to which it belongs. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, work emerges as the content of the relationships that unify the social. The centrality of work to Gilman’s narrative of progress is most explicitly put forth in her 1898 book titled *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in*

Social Evolution. In this treatise, Gilman defines women's subjugation as the effect of woman's economic dependence on man, and draws upon the logic of natural selection to argue that this relationship cultivates "abnormal" forms of sexual difference that interfere with the trajectory of social evolution. This argument begins from the assumption that work is nothing less than the expression of human life: "...what is the best way to improve the human race, and therefore our highest duty? Recognizing the organic relation of Society; that our very life, to say nothing of our improvement, rests on our becoming properly related to each other in the specialized service which constitutes a human life..." (Ceplair 151). As this passage reveals, work is the term that stands in for the "proper" relationship that individuals should have to one another within society. Accompanying the emphasis on specialization is the vision of a social body that is rational, ordered, and legible, like the anatomy of the body. It is also one where the logic of taxonomy has been totalized and "improvement" is consonant with each remaining in their proper place. In tying individuals to a "proper" function, the concept of work in Gilman's text carries the prescription for all members of the collectivity to remain within their designated frame. Put otherwise, what is being put forth is the desire for an identity between individuals and their social function, that is, where the meaning of the individual is identical to the recognition of their place within society. This model of society not only relies upon a perfect consensus of meaning, in other words, there is no disagreement concerning what the role of each member should be, but it also casts those that do not conform to their position as endangering the life of the whole. With the "increasing interdependence of the component parts," each part becomes crucial to the operation of social life (Ceplair 95). With the logic of specialization, then, the significance of the individual is at once reduced to the smallest of roles and also endowed with the power to debilitate the survival of the collective. Along these lines, Gilman's narrative of development towards increased specialization is explicitly animated with the rhetoric of survival: "a society so constructed survives, where the same number of living beings, unorganized would perish" (Ceplair 95). The organization of society as a "complex bundle of members and organs in indivisible relation" is therefore a matter of life itself, and within this framing, the interests of the individual coincide exactly with the interests of the social whole (95). Correspondingly, this also means that the defining feature of a common consciousness, that which the savage lacks, is consent to such a common purpose. If consent is enacted

by performing the specific function “for which they [individuals] are evolved,” this means that the position of the individual within society is in a sense predetermined by nature (150). On the one hand, then, the joining of work to civilization through the logic of specialization undermines the agency of the modern subject, and the notion that the course of one’s life is the fulfillment of individual choice. Rather, the destiny of the individual is here completely determined by the needs of the social body. At the same time, this move establishes a hierarchy within the “constituent parts” as the natural outcome of evolution. As Gilman says herself, the “servants and helpers” of the world who work their whole lives without any recognition and die in poverty still should not be pitied, for in the end they were “true to their fundamental duty as human beings” (150). What is significant about this staging of the social in which work is the expression of human nature, then, is that there is no stake in conceptualizing individuals as equals, even though the emphasis is on a shared unity of purpose. Put otherwise, the identification of a common that binds the individuals of a society together in a struggle for survival still ascribes a relative value to each human life.

Mapping out the ways in which work is figured as the motor of progress as well as the sign of a valuable life within Gilman’s writings is crucial precisely because it forms the basis of her approach to the “woman question.” Within feminist scholarship, Gilman has been read as offering one of the first radical critiques of the doctrine of separate spheres. Building upon this characterization of work as the foundation for evolution, Gilman develops her argument by claiming that women’s failure to contribute her labor is detrimental to the collective as a whole: “Here is where women are robbed of their place in the path of progress by being denied that development of industry which means as much to them as it does to men and this injury to women is felt as seriously by the race as if it was done to men” (Ceplair 77). As with prior articulations, the effects of women’s exclusion are cast in relation to a broader social to which woman inherently belongs, despite her failure to satisfy the full conditions of membership. By that token, the case for women’s liberation from the domestic sphere is tied to the same gesture that grounds “woman” within the confines of an exclusive community. As this passage demonstrates, the collective that is harmed by women’s economic dependence on man is delineated as “the race,” which once again suggests that “woman” can only appear within the bounds of this argument as the subject-member of a collective founded upon

whiteness. While other scholars have noted that Gilman's critique of the distinction between public and private, one I will turn to next, is intimately bound up with her views on race, this has been largely demonstrated through discussions of her broader commitment to eugenics and fears about miscegenation.⁷¹ By working to untangle the ways in which racial difference is woven into the finer details of the conceptual edifice through which the "human" is defined, this reading is also an effort to further excavate the foundations of eugenic thinking.

At the broadest level, as we have already seen, Gilman maps the trajectory of evolution onto increased specialization, and consequently makes it possible to evaluate different forms of industry in terms of their relationship to progress. This staging of society as consonant with the human body takes race as the basis for an imagined unity of function. In other words, as the individual components of the body work together to ensure its survival, the individual members of the society fulfill their specialized task for the sake of "the race." The reorganization of labor that Gilman sees as necessary for women to contribute to the advancement of specialized industry involves the displacement of reproductive labor into the public sphere. In particular, Gilman argues that the relegation of tasks having to do with necessities of survival to the familial realm is the remnant of a prior savagery, and the continued source of women's subjugation. Her call for transferring domestic work out of the home and rendering it into a collective responsibility has conventionally been read as a critical assault on the invisible labor that enables the functioning of the nuclear family. However, Gilman's dismantling of the public and the private and the forms of work associated with each gains its coherence from a prior distinction between savagery and civilization. According to the underlying evolutionary narrative, the savage spends all his time and energy on satisfying "immediate physical needs" (Ceplair 161). In this arrangement, the family is the only social unit, and the purpose and end of all labor (Ceplair 171). The work done by women, both because it is focused on the necessities of life and because it is organized around the unit of the family, is thus the mark of a primitive state. As such, it is the logic of race that allows for domestic labor to be constituted as an impediment to progress and for women to be released from their confinement within the home. Put otherwise, this call for women's right to work is premised upon the imperative to police and maintain the

⁷¹ In particular, Newman (1999); Nadkarni (2006); Seitler (2003).

boundaries of racial difference. Hence the problem with domestic labor is cast in the following terms: “By what art, what charm, what miracle, has the twentieth century preserved *alive* the prehistoric squaw!” If Gilman’s critique of the gendered division of labor positions “woman” in difference from the racialized figure of the “prehistoric squaw,” this suggests that the subject of her feminism is not “free of race,” as Nadkarni has put it, but rather depends upon the specter of an oppressed feminine other. At one level, this means that the possibility of woman’s equality can only ever be possible for white women, given that this figural other is what gives substance to the meaning of equality. Drawing this line of thought back to Mary Wollstonecraft, the racialized woman provides the reference point for conceiving what it means to be liberated from sexual oppression. To be free, in other words, is to identify oneself as other than (in this case) the Native American woman. At another level, however, this also suggests that race provides the ground for articulating the injustice associated with the organization of sexual difference within society. Again and again, racial difference stands in as the explanation for the transformations and restructurings called for by Gilman. For example, in support of transferring the labor of cooking into a public responsibility, she remarks: “the Turk finds it as hard to think of a home without a harem as we do to think of a home without a kitchen” (Ceplair 172). If dismantling the ideology of separate spheres is premised upon its association with the racial other’s inherent proclivity for women’s subjugation, then race in effect provides the explanation for countering the arrangement of social relations in accordance with sexual relations. The larger point to be taken from Gilman’s explicit commitment to a developmental theory of modernity structured upon a taxonomy of racial difference, then, is that the trajectory of feminist thought traced in this dissertation has persistently looked to race to mark the problem with using sexual difference as the basis for particular orderings of society. In other words, taking a racial hierarchy for granted has allowed feminists to avoid articulating what, in itself, is the injustice of making meaning of the social through the distinction between masculinity and femininity.

In her discussion of Gilman’s contribution to rethinking social relations of labor and production, Nadkarni makes the important move of identifying the specific points where her critique opens onto and intersects with the platform of the eugenics movement. In particular, she traces the ways in which Gilman’s approach to work, and the

significance of production more generally, comes to be aligned with reproduction. According to her reading, Gilman does not simply argue for women's entry into the market economy as abstract subjects interchangeable with man. Rather, she posits motherhood as the apex of production, thereby placing the female body as the privileged site for determining the state and progress of society. The opening for eugenics therefore comes about as a result of Gilman's commitment to maintaining the specificity of women's contribution. Furthermore, the notion of "social motherhood," or the idea that childbearing constitutes a social rather than an individual responsibility, is possible because of how the individual's relationship to society is defined within the interpretative frame of the social as human body. Beginning with the idea that the duty of every individual, by nature of being human, is to perform the specific function that best contributes to the improvement of the social body, Gilman inserts motherhood into this teleology of specialization. With the groundwork that has already been laid out, it becomes necessary to cast only certain individuals as adequate for fulfilling the task of mothering, and furthermore, like every other form of labor, it is to be measured and evaluated in terms of its effects upon a singular and unified social body. In this sense, the significance that comes to be attached to motherhood and the labor of reproduction is indebted to a much more deeply entrenched conceptualization of the social. In placing the emphasis on Gilman's efforts to reorganize women's position within a collective that carries the mark of the human (as in, the boundaries of society correspond with the boundaries of humanity), this reading diverges from the tendency within feminist scholarship to primarily link eugenics to a politics of nationalism. While it is undoubtedly important to recognize the ways in which concern with the reproduction of the white race is made legible through a naturalization of the nation, it is also the case that the kinds of prescriptions associated with eugenics about which subjects can and should reproduce also emerge from a broader set of interpretations and imaginings. Moreover, in terms of the implications for feminism, the commitment to improving the state of the race that serves as the organizing crux of eugenic thought is precisely what the argument for women's rights has taken as its end.

As the argument has charted up to this point, the demand for a recognition of woman's humanity, to paraphrase Gilman's point of departure, draws its implications from the state of "the race," a concept that is itself refracted through "civilization."

Underlying the commitment to progress and improvement, moreover, is a community in which the interests of the individual coincide with the interests of the whole. The positing of a social that can be represented to itself, and which can determine and evaluate its own relative state, has a specific condition of emergence that coincides with the consolidation of the nation-state, but also involves a redefinition of the previous distinction between the sphere of the polis and that of the household and family. Returning to Hannah Arendt's argument concerning the emergence of the social and its bearing upon the division between the public and the private is instructive here. As Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, the rise of the social designates the end of a particular kind of freedom and the possibilities for political action associated with it. In the Greek model of the city-state, the household was the realm of necessity, charged with the maintenance of life and all those activities related to the survival of the species. The household, ruled over by the patriarch and thus constituted by inequality, is the condition of freedom in the polis. In other words, this private realm allows the polis to be a site freed from necessity, and hence the relations of ruling and being ruled. With the rise of society, the activities of the household related to the maintenance of life have been transferred into the public and made into a "collective concern" (33). As a result, the private has been absorbed into the public, creating a "body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping" (28). Arendt sees this transformation as closing the opening for individuality and action within public life. This is because society demands of its members both conformism and uniformity, and to act, as she says, "as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest" (39). Given this prescription for consensus, the equality of modern society can be said to have simply stepped in the place of the ruler of the household. Put otherwise, the kind of equality brought along with the rise of the social is structurally similar to the despotism of the private in that it demands subordination to a common interest and a common opinion (40). Arendt further suggests that this modern definition of equality has effectively substituted action (also the expression of the singularity of the individual) with behavior, since the members of society are expected to demonstrate their ability to behave in particular ways and are judged accordingly. The rise of the social thus ushered in the science of economics and its central tool, statistics,

taking man as a “conditioned” animal whose behavior reflects patterns that can be measured and evaluated. As a result, those who do not conform to the definition of the human demanded by society are not only marked as deviant or abnormal and hence expendable, but more importantly, their eradication becomes a matter of survival. Arendt’s account of these changes suggest that the emergence of society coincided with a new object of politics, that is, the survival of the species. Of specific consequence for contending with Gilman’s arguments, Arendt connects the social that is modeled on the one-ness of opinion and interest with the logic of the species. As has been demonstrated throughout, the understanding of the human as species is predicated upon an other whose position on the margins allows for the binding together of man through his animal-ness. Following this, it is possible to say that the emergence of the social that Arendt traces is premised upon an unstated repression of racial difference. As such, the concern with the survival of the white race, what is taken to be the central motivation for the eugenics movement, needs to be located not simply in relation to the arrival of Darwinian evolution on the scene, but rather as complicit with a particular demarcation of the public and the private.

Woman as the “Race-Type”

In calling for labor relating to the necessities of survival to take place in the public rather than the private, Gilman’s proposed solution to women’s confinement within the home also comes to intersect with a restructuring of society that prescribes norms of behavior coded through race. To approach the thinking of the human as species in this way might offer a different conceptualization of feminism’s intersection with eugenics. The rest of the chapter seeks to develop this point by challenging the ways in which Gilman’s work has been read as a reflection of the surrounding debates over natural selection and its implications for the achievement of progress. In Nadkarni’s discussion of the role of race within Gilman’s feminism, she concludes that this critique of women’s position is predicated upon the threat of “racial mixing,” and hence the feminist subject that is produced in Gilman’s work is one that must be protected from miscegenation. In relation to the question of industry and women’s work, Nadkarni suggests that because Gilman’s dismissal of domestic labor is contingent upon marking it as “primitive,” her

rationale for change ultimately rests upon the representation of women as racialized figures. The assumption of an evolutionary telos charted through the categories of the primitive and civilized, although not particular to Gilman, is rearticulated in the temporal frame of anthropological science. In this respect, Gilman's characterization of woman's condition relies upon the assignment of the primitive to an earlier moment in the history of man. Departing from Wollstonecraft and Stanton, woman appears as an anachronism, the remainder of man's past within the present. Because this narrative of evolution (one that can also be labeled that of the social evolutionists) takes racial difference as the evidence that man has an origin, the representation of woman in terms of a developmental lag relies upon the prior category of the primitive for intelligibility. Although Nadkarni does not put it in such terms, this reading is provocative in that it suggests a universal history of man is responsible for providing feminism with both its directionality and end. At the same time, however, the relationship between the terms "woman" and "primitive" is not one of simple substitution, for critical to the structure of the argument is precisely their difference, and the impossibility of the "primitive" appearing under the sign "woman." Consequently, the failure of "woman" to circulate as a universal category is not due to evolutionary racism "getting in the way," as the story has too often been told. Approaching the intersection of feminism with (what has been broadly tucked under the heading of) social Darwinism from this starting point provides an opening onto a different terrain than that of historical empiricism.

While conflicting accounts are given of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's contributions to the question of sexual difference, feminist scholarship has consistently positioned her as marking a break with the woman's movement of the nineteenth century, which is seen to be organized around the mobilization of Victorian femininity as the sign of civilization. In particular, Louise Michele Newman (1999) locates Gilman as the figure that reversed this equation by arguing that sexual difference was not the outcome of civilizational progress, but rather a lasting vestige of the primitive. Within this particular narration, Gilman signals a pivotal moment in the history of feminism because she effectively opens the door to understanding gender as socially constructed by delinking woman's role from any grounding in "nature." This move is significant in that it also calls forth anthropological knowledge, for other "cultures" (understood as simplified states of the

self) become the scene for confirming the construction of sex roles.⁷² As Newman goes on to suggest, however, the challenge to the biological fixity of women's sexual difference takes its structure from already established narratives concerning racial evolution. More specifically, the primitive's capacity for improvement that provided the imperative for colonialism as well as the affirmation of its success lends narrative coherence to woman's capacity for change. To paraphrase the point, if the primitive could evolve, women could too. What is at stake here is that the conceptualization of sexual difference as produced (and thereby open to change) rests upon the racial other's potential to be rendered human, pointing to a significant way in which feminist thought is implicated in the colonial episteme. Gilman's contemporary, Mary Roberts Smith Coolidge, explicitly noted this correspondence between racial and sexual difference: "in some aspects, the woman-questions are analogous to race questions."⁷³ Coolidge's comment very concisely captures one of the main threads running through this dissertation: within the framework of women's rights, race and sexual difference can only appear through the structure of the analogy.⁷⁴ Woman is thus conceptually tied to whiteness because it derives its stability and coherence from taking racial difference as its ground. Although intersectionality has been widely embraced as the solution to the unmarked whiteness of this category, such an approach cannot contend with the ways in which the very differences it takes for granted as its starting point (race, class, etc) are already figured as gender's constitutive outside.

According to Newman as well as Kamala Visweswaran's reading of Gilman, the recasting of Victorian femininity as an impediment to civilization leads her to foreground the similarities between (white) women and (white) men. More specifically, the commonality of woman to man is achieved through their respective difference from the primitive, an equation that makes way for Gilman's rejection of conventional gender roles. Gilman's commitment to eugenics is consequently explained as a causal effect of the ways in which her critique of ideal femininity was animated by racial anxieties. To

⁷² Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* stands as the symptomatic example.

⁷³ quoted in Newman (1999), 135.

⁷⁴ The treatment of race and gender as analogous categories also extends into sexuality studies. Most recently, Laura Sjoberg (2012) takes the example of the surveillance and disciplining of bodies that is justified through the logic of "terror," to make the argument that trans oppression can be conceptualized as analogous to racial oppression. In that such an approach closes off race from sexuality, it implicitly posits the normative trans subject as white. As a result, a necessary racism accompanies this framework.

put this more concisely, the narrative order that is imposed onto Gilman's writings may also participate in disciplining and ordering the set of ideologies that carry the name "eugenics." Working through Gilman's wide corpus of essays and fictional works, it becomes increasingly difficult to box her in as either reclaiming the specific difference of woman or as rejecting the normative conventions of femininity that can then be done away with. Indeed, this might not even be the question to ask, for it maintains the assumption that eugenics can be latched to an identifiable and definitive staging of sexual difference that can then be labeled as problematic. Rather, Gilman's attempts to hold apart the categories of the human, the masculine and the feminine as distinct, while relating them to one another in ways that generate both a means and an end to women's equality, can perhaps serve as another avenue into contending with the conceptual architecture of eugenics. In addition, this might also disrupt the assumption that Gilman's allegiance to eugenics is primarily an attribute of historical contingency, for the larger purpose at hand is not to indict Gilman (either as an agential subject or as the product of an episteme), but instead to contend with the formulation of "woman" that her work puts forth.

Many scholars have detailed the influence of Lester Frank Ward, a prominent figure in the debates surrounding evolution, on Gilman's rejection of Victorian gender roles. Throughout these discussions, Ward's revision of Darwin, and his "gynaecocentric theory" in particular, is seen to provide the intellectual backing for Gilman's biological explanations of women's superiority. In the debates concerning the status of acquired as opposed to inherited characteristics, Ward departs from the Darwinian understanding of evolution as having no necessary aim or purpose. Carl Degler (1991) describes Ward's attraction to Lamarckian evolution (characterized by a belief in the possibility of transmitting acquired characteristics) as motivated by a commitment to political equality. In contrast to the social Darwinists, who looked to biology as the site for determining the potential of individual life, Ward identified the environment as the "limiting factor" (21). Joined with a view of nature as inherently driven towards the improvement of the race, the belief in acquired characteristics carried the imperative to develop "good qualities" in individuals for the benefit of future generations. While Degler doesn't work through the racial hierarchies embedded within the very logic of improvement and its accompanying classifications of "good" and "bad" qualities, what can be taken as symptomatic in this

oversight is precisely how equality gets articulated in terms of the advancement of “the race.” More specifically, equality is understood as ultimately reconcilable with the delineation of an exclusionary grouping. Instead of locating Gilman within the various rifts between Herbert Spencer, Darwin, Lamarck, and the other cardinal thinkers of evolutionary biology, this reading attempts to shift the terms of the conversation by asking what understanding of women’s equality calls forth the turn to biology and finds within it the necessary proof for its claims. And concomitantly, how is the concept of “the race” that is posed as the implicit subject of evolution constituted through sexual difference? In this vein, Gilman’s struggles to situate the meaning of “woman” can be instructive for contending with the limits of appealing to the truth of the human to secure women’s equality.

In order to challenge the model of evolutionary theory and its related scientific discourses as a set of ideologies that bore down upon the question of women’s rights, Gilman’s deployment of Lester Frank Ward’s arguments need to be read in terms of how they enabled a certain understanding of “woman” to emerge. In other words, how does Ward’s staging of sexual difference provide the opening for “woman” to be seen as a subject of equality? Ward’s engagement with the issue of natural selection and sexual difference takes place in an 1888 piece published in *The Forum* titled “Our Better Halves.” Beginning with the premise that women’s current status within human society hinders the evolution of the species, a formulation that is by now deeply familiar, Ward contends that the female rather than the male should be taken as representative of the species, or in his words, the “race type.” As a result, woman is for him the locus of evolutionary progress:

“...Accepting evolution as we must, recognizing heredity as the distinctive attribute of the female sex, it becomes clear that it must be from the steady advance of woman rather than from the uncertain fluctuations of man that the sure and solid progress of the future is to come...Woman is the unchanging trunk of the genealogic tree...Woman is the race, and the race can be raised up only as she is raised up... True science teaches that the elevation of woman is the only sure road to the evolution of man.” (Ceplair 27)

What is striking in reading this passage after Wollstonecraft and Stanton is precisely how unremarkable Ward’s account of “woman” appears. To recall the argument of the previous chapter, the casting of woman as standing in for the race served as the conceptual framework for the appeal to suffrage. The justification for rights was there

premised upon woman as concomitantly embodying both the cause of social degradation and the key to progress. Woman was thus necessary for rendering the twin concepts of progress and “the race” coherent, serving as the ground through which the fiction of a collective unity could be fulfilled as well as providing the standard of measure for its advancement. At the most basic level, noting the resonances with Stanton’s conceptualization of women’s condition intervenes in the cordoning off that occurs within conversations of social Darwinism. As we will see with Gilman, following the logic of woman as emblematic of the race to its end creates the imperative for “selective motherhood” and related eugenic principles. Hence the roots of this thought do not lie with Ward or his interlocutors, but in a narrative ordering of women’s subordination that follows the structure of universal history, and reaches towards the fulfillment of man.

In this culminating passage from Ward’s essay, “woman” holds together a constellation of concepts that are necessary to the teleology that it posits. Man’s ability to be open to “uncertain fluctuations” and occupy the space of contingency relies upon woman’s position as static and unchanging. Indeed, the structuring of evolution as an explanation of the human condition defines man as a subject in flux, constantly undergoing transformation and change. According to its very premise, then, evolutionary theory produces man as deeply unstable and thereby also unknowable. If nature is taken to be in a constant state of transition, then the truth of man must necessarily evade being pinned down once and for all. This also throws into question the ability to secure the coherency of “the race,” for there is no core that can be claimed and upon which a discrete identity can be fixed. At the same time, the concept of progress casts man as containing a given future within himself that is brought into being through the proper application of reason. In Ward’s text, the incommensurable divide that emerges between the subject of evolution and the subject of progress is negotiated on the terrain of sexual difference. Woman is the referent for the race, the “unchanging trunk of the genealogic tree,” that organizes and anchors the unfolding march of history. Through her “steady advance,” she provides order to the chaos of evolutionary change. But the same passage that claims the fixity of woman to secure the coherence of “the race” also makes her elevation into the sign of the “evolution of man.” Woman’s uplift therefore provides the confirmation that evolution has occurred and is indeed in line with progress. As such, woman serves to suture evolution to progress, thereby rendering the former into a

synonym for the latter. By the end of the passage, the “evolution of man” is literally joined to and made contingent upon the “elevation of woman.” The first thing to note, then, is that evolution, elevation, and progress are clearly constituted through sexual difference in that these concepts rely upon an irreducible distinction between man and woman. At another level, this constellation of terms also rests on the contradictory consolidation of “woman” as at once static and evolving, unchanging yet undergoing constant transformation. In the course of this passage, “woman” splinters and breaks apart from the aporetic meanings that she is made to contain within herself. As the coherency of this category begins to unravel, so does the larger conceptual edifice of evolution which cannot do without the absolute intelligibility of sexual difference.

While the particular staging of “woman” as the race-type within Gilman’s writings is clearly drawn from Ward, it can also be viewed as a rearticulation of the terms through which the “woman question” has been posed within the framework of natural rights. Put differently, there is a way in which the emergence of the claim to women’s rights marked by Wollstonecraft’s pivotal treatise has always required the casting of “woman” as both the embodiment and measure of a social demarcated through the boundaries of race. Again, the purpose of reading Gilman’s struggle to articulate a separation between “race function” and “sex function” is to contend with how it is implicated in a far more deeply embedded conceptualization of sexual difference. The current organization of society and women’s designated role within it, Gilman argues, detracts from the logic of natural selection and therefore endangers the viability and future of the species. In the most basic terms, her narrative follows the familiar structure of woman’s condition as a violation of the order of nature, as in the following passage from the *Man-Made World*: “...there is another great natural force which works steadily to keep all animals up to the race standard; that is sexual selection. Throughout nature the male is the variant...the female, on the other hand, varies much less, remaining nearer the race type; and her function is to select among these varying males the specimens most valuable to the race (49).” Like Ward, Gilman stakes an integral role for woman by positioning her as a static and unchanging anchor within a chaotic world of constant evolutionary flux. Woman’s difference from man is crucial in providing a stable ground of continuity, and lending a fixed point of reference for a progressing “race.” Woman, in other words, gives structure to the threatening uncertainty of man’s “variance,” by

standing in for and thus safeguarding the identity of the race. As a result, the concept of “the race” gains meaning through “woman,” for the consolidation of the former cannot do without the presumed coherency of the latter.

The larger point to be drawn from Gilman’s (selective) use of evolutionary biology is that the very distinction between masculinity and femininity itself, independent of the ways in which she rearranges these terms to claim the distinctiveness of women, is staged within the boundaries of the race. As a result, sexual difference can only appear within the confines of whiteness, for “woman” and “man” are constituted as discrete categories in relation to an understanding of the human as “race” that is latched to civilization. Sexual difference is therefore articulated in terms of measurable benefits and identifiable ends. It is not incidental, then, that the passage on woman as race-type employs the language of “value” to reserve the future for “the specimens most valuable to the race.” This particular definition of woman as the discerning agent that will protect and ensure the fulfillment of the race, a definition that collapses woman with reproduction, emerges out of the imperative to tie sexual difference to a distinct function. Gilman’s positioning of woman as evolutionarily destined to do the work of parsing and valuing “specimens” is in many ways the culmination of the imperative to identify women’s contribution to society. In this sense, any framing of women’s equality that justifies itself through this equation leads onto a drive to maximize “the race.” Once again, this suggests that the purifying impulse attributed to eugenics is not adequately accounted for through a critique of nationalism, but must also include a consideration of the category “woman.” To be more explicit, the move to assign a fixed meaning to sexual difference might itself prescribe the eugenic vision of a white future that courses through the writings of Gilman.

As we saw in Stanton, the conceptualization of the human as species looks to the figure of the savage to constitute the human as an iteration of the animal, but with a difference. Another way to characterize this relation is in terms of the supplement, meaning that the human and the animal are not merely opposed but rather elicit one another. If the gap between the human and the animal must be maintained, even as evolutionary biology constantly seeks to explain the human through an evaluation of animal behavior, this gap is held apart by the savage who does not fully belong to either. The racial logic that underpins the model of the human-as-species becomes particularly

evident through Gilman's attempt to demarcate woman as a difference that is both irreducible to man, and yet integral to the human. In an article titled "Our Brain and What Ails Them," she writes:

"The female of the species is more nearly the race type; the male is more especially the sex type. This we have never seen because of the universal assumption that the dominant masculine tastes, abilities and instincts were human. They are not in the least bit human; they are merely masculine, distinguishing all male creatures, human or not... This overdetermined "male mind" naturally considers any divergent action shown by the other sex as "female;" whereas it may not be female at all, but merely human." (Ceplair 230)

The fraught triangulation of the masculine, the feminine and the human that takes shape in this passage happens against the backdrop of differentiating between the race type and the sex type. In order to challenge the correspondence between man and the human, which relegates woman to the confines of the feminine and also denies her humanity, Gilman casts woman as the more proper representative of the race. As a result, the reorganization that gives woman access to the human is achieved by invoking the model of the ideal type that can stand in for the species as a whole. The taxonomic ordering that allows for a clear demarcation between species relies upon the assumption that its defining characteristics can be distilled within a single, perfect specimen. As a result of this valuing, however, difference in the form of variation becomes literally of no use precisely because it does not hold a place within the classificatory scheme. Hence it can be said that the logic of the species carries within it the impulse to render difference expendable. The appeal to the idea of a "race type," then, similarly seeks to establish an ideal figure as the reference point for the species. What is significant here, however, is that woman's insertion into the human takes place by posing woman as emblematic of the race. In this move, woman is universalized into an abstraction divested of particularity (woman in the singular stands in for the race) at the same time that the human is collapsed into a racial type. Within this schema, woman can only appear in the singular, that is, as an abstract category that defines itself against the variation of man. As we saw in the previous passage, woman, in her proper role as the keeper of the "race standard," imposes a measured order onto the uneven field of men. In her generality, woman is not simply emptied of difference, but is instead specified by the contours of whiteness. Woman's humanity, to condense Gilman's conceptual frame, is thus premised upon enclosing the human within a (white) race, and erecting a standard of measure which

poses some as more “valuable” than others.

In many respects, the distinction between race function and sex function calls forth the conflation between woman and mother that is seen as one of the defining elements of the eugenic platform. The responsibility of selection that accompanies the “race type” is conducted not only by woman, but woman-as-mother of the race: “Today the human woman and the human man are alike able to discuss deformity and disease to their beloved ones. A new moral sense is called for here...that shall rate the mother’s responsibility in selecting the father of her children, and in securing to them a pure inheritance in constitution, far higher than the hush-and-cover policy of our racial beginnings” (Ceplair 68). If the role that is carved for woman is to improve the race through her natural ability to discriminate, then she is also the one charged with bringing a defined future into being. The definition of woman that is put forth by Gilman is therefore inseparable from a concept of the future, and in particular, a future conceived as the determined product of the present. Woman is the tie that binds the present to the future, and that insures the transmission of a specified inheritance. The slippage between the “human woman” and “mother” that occurs in this passage marks the ways in which women’s role is collapsed with reproduction, understood as the replication of “good” and “bad” traits. Given that the teleology of progress scripts history as a set of causal relations that extend into the future, woman emerges as indispensable to this structure. In her role as mother, woman secures the notion that the future is contained within the present, consequently reifying the human as the center and author of history. The flip side of woman standing in for the race, then, is that she also becomes the vehicle for “deformity and disease.” Gilman’s staging of sexual difference therefore leads into the question of which subjects should be allowed to reproduce. As a result, the prerequisite for motherhood and child-rearing is to meet certain criteria of the human, an assumption that continues to circulate within contemporary arguments for universal access to birth control. What gets exposed through Gilman’s discussion is precisely that anxieties about the future of society are intimately bound up with a logic that measures the value of life in relation to an ideal standard of the human. The opening to eugenics, then, is already forged in Stanton’s casting of woman as the “mother of the race.”

Woman’s Degradation and the Eugenic Future

In the previous readings of Wollstonecraft and Stanton, we saw that the argument for women's rights relies upon a narrative of women's degradation to justify itself. For this reason, the condition of women is cast as both a threat to civilization, as well as the marker of progress. Gilman thus resonates with a lineage in which the case for women's equality is made not on behalf of women themselves, but rather for the good of society. To review the argument, the concern for progress and improvement that has served as the end to feminist appeals rests upon the projection of a society that is currently performing its own demise. The articulation of such a demise is premised upon race at several levels. First, the boundaries of the social are drawn through civilization, and what comes to later emerge as the (white) race. Furthermore, the prospect of civilizational demise is rendered intelligible through the invoking of a distinctly racialized threat. Specifically, the descent is figured as a becoming-like-the-other, an other that is constantly poised to infiltrate and contaminate the identity of the self. The anxieties over immigration as well as the extension of the vote to African-American men can ultimately be seen as going hand in hand with the argument for women's rights, for the menace posed by the presence of these figures buttresses the necessity of woman's uplift. Adding Gilman to this line of thought reveals that a set of recurring and profound tensions come to be crystallized within the category "woman," who traffics between the origin and endpoint of the narrative, the source of society's degradation and the only possibility of its redemption.

Following a parallel structure with Wollstonecraft and Stanton, Gilman hinges the justification for transforming the current organization of sexual difference upon the danger posed by women.

As such, it is because woman endangers the security and survival of the society that an intervention is required. To invoke a previous argument, the framing of women's rights in the name of society carries within it a certain misogyny (to return to Susan Gubar's term), because it demands that woman's existing condition be constituted in opposition to the requirements of progress or civilization. In what is now emerging as an underlying thread across this itinerary, woman appears as a debased and degraded subject within the lines of feminist arguments that seek (albeit in discordant ways) for equality with man. If Gilman's staging of the nexus between woman and humanity leads to a set of discourses that rationalize barring the "inferior" from reproducing, it is not simply the evidence of

feminism caving to eugenic logic, or the strategic combination of two separate political platforms. What is disconcerting about tracking the resonances across these series of thinkers is that the account of woman's degradation, which in Gilman's work is very visibly connected to the drive for racial purity, is already the organizing crux of Wollstonecraft's text. As previously noted, scholarship that attends to the phenomenon of the eugenics movement tends to locate it exclusively within the frame of the nation. For Balibar, discussed in the last chapter, the reciprocal determination between nationalism and racism means that eugenics is not an extremist position, but rather one that exposes the nation's underlying reliance upon the fiction of a common origin defined by race. By contrast, I would like to suggest that the escalating drive to exteriorize difference that finds its fulfillment in the eugenics movement is not merely a symptom of the nation, but is also firmly embedded within the category "woman." To take gender not as a category (as does intersectionality) but rather as the ground that holds meaning in place, recasts the imperative for racial purity as one that fundamentally plays out on the terrain of sexual difference. That is, the eugenic imagining of the future can now be understood as incited by the joining of woman to the human.

In describing the effects of woman's position upon the "race mind," Gilman contends that she has been deprived of the full exercise of the brain, which is the essential "organ of humanity" (Ceplair 227). Woman's debasement is refracted through a teleology that takes the savage as a prior iteration of man, or unfulfilled humanity. This is made particularly evident in the following passage detailing the poor state of women's brains: "But for the whole range of faculties and interests which distinguish the civilized man from the savage, none were for her save a few partial and perverse activities like those of what we designate with such exquisite absurdity—'Society'" (Ceplair 227). Gilman continues with the implications of woman's underdevelopment:

Whatever morbid results appeared from this wholly morbid condition we unhesitatingly set down to the peculiarities of sex, and having produced a paradoxical, sub-human, extra-human creature, we regarded it with fond pride and sagely remarked: 'Woman is an enigma.' If we had done this to some outside creation, producing our amusing monstrosity in tree or flower, the results would have been less injurious. The deadly work was done upon the human race—and the most important half for its effect upon the whole—the mother. (Ceplair 228)

Several points are to be drawn here. To begin, the essential difference of civilization holds woman apart from man. According to Gilman, the difference of woman needs to be

reconsidered because the accepted understanding of femininity makes her analogous to the savage. The rationalization for recognizing that “each girl is born with as much brain as her brother,” or put otherwise that woman’s essential humanity is the same as man’s, is therefore premised upon the need to save the (civilized) human from the clutches of the savage. Hence the redemption of woman is achieved through a reinscription of the savage on the margins of humanity. What is at stake in drawing out the civilizational hierarchy that provides the enabling backdrop to Gilman’s argument is precisely to expose the necessary violence that accompanies the consolidation of woman as a subject of equality. Succinctly put, the potential for woman’s humanity is contingent upon the inhumanity of the other. That the passage invokes the “sub-human” or the “extra-human” to describe woman in her current condition further reveals that the definition of the human at work in Gilman’s text necessarily produces the category of the inhuman. But while woman’s relationship to the human is placed into question, what is reified is precisely her natural place as a representative member of the “human race.” If woman is currently in a “morbid condition,” this is due to exterior influences interfering with her development, and not reflective of her proper self. Woman’s condition as the sub-human is thus “paradoxical,” while the savage is not yet fully human. Indeed, the contradiction contained in woman’s degradation is contingent upon the savage serving as the proper referent for debased humanity.

The aberration that is woman, to follow the direction of Gilman’s argument, is then cast in terms of its effect upon the social body. As we saw with Stanton, the narration of women’s degradation serves to demarcate the boundaries of the society that is under threat, while also ensuring that the support of women’s equality gains traction from its implications upon the whole. Supporting women’s equality is therefore made inseparable from supporting the survival of society as species-life. As the passage unfolds, the monstrosity of woman, who is reduced to being the mere product of man, casts a “deadly” shadow upon the human race. On the one hand, then, woman stands as witness to man’s ability to direct the course of evolution and determine the constitution of individuals. As such, woman exposes the consequences of misdirected evolution, thereby reifying man as absolute sovereign over nature. It is through woman’s monstrosity that man achieves full domination over nature and becomes the author of history. By consequence, woman is rendered interchangeable with the flower or the tree as the object

of man's manipulation, raw material to be transformed into a future entirely of his own making. Unlike the latter, however, woman carries the threat of death, that is, of literally putting an end to the future. Woman's capacity to effect the whole is specifically tied to her reproductive power, through which she is seen as capable of determining the future that is to come. The understanding of the future as the product of the present, a relationship that also underlies the scripting of history as the unfolding of reason, can thus be said to rest upon the figure of the mother. The mother, in other words, is the locus through which the present is captured and transmitted into an inheritance for the future. It is only as mother, then, that woman emerges as a subject worthy of being redeemed. If, in Gilman's frame, women's equality matters only in terms of its bearings upon the future of the (human) race, then the collapsing of woman into mother that occurs in this passage is structurally necessary to the concept of equality that she posits.

In the rearticulation of woman's degradation that occurs in Gilman's text, the connection that she draws between the condition of the mother and the condition of the race brings forth the conventional elements attributed to eugenic thought. For example, here the narration of degeneracy leads directly into the classification of "inferior types:" "Women...have it is true kept on replenishing the earth with new people, but have done scarcely nothing toward race improvement. In their degenerate position as dependents they could not even fulfill their essential duty of race choice—but were chosen by the sex not fitted for that responsibility, and so have helplessly assisted in transmitting inferior types" (Ceplair 269). Notably, it is through her position as a "degenerate" that woman is also seen as fulfilling an "essential duty" to the race. Her position as the origin and cause of inferiority within the social body thus provides the terms for woman's inclusion as a critical element to "improvement." Casting women's equality as a means to achieving the progress of man, an equation that retains a continued hold within the discourses surrounding universal human rights, thus requires an enumeration of the value of individuals within society. Reinforcing a recurring point, the logic of "improvement" cannot do without the category of the inferior. Furthermore, because improvement relies upon a unit of measure and the confirmation of a net change, this means that the borders that demarcate the superior from the inferior have to be continually drawn and redrawn. This escalating drive to identify and exteriorize the margins is therefore deeply complicit with the claim to women's degradation. As we already saw in the last chapter, the

category of “woman,” put most explicitly, is held together through the injunction to purify that appends the human-as-race.

Critical to the description of women’s degenerate state is the accompanying notion that her truth is other than what appears. Put otherwise, this assumes that there is an underlying truth to “woman” beneath the layers of meaning that have been imposed upon her by an “androcentric culture.” Once again, this staging of “woman” is familiar in that, beginning with Wollstonecraft, the truth of sexual difference is deferred into a future that cannot be accessed from the vantage point of the present. Gilman’s invoking of woman as an enigma is a fitting reflection of the ways in which woman is continually cast under the sign of man, a difference that is the product of his control over society, education, or in this case, the dominance of the sex instinct. What appears as woman is therefore only what man has created, and the real meaning of femininity continues to evade any attempt to grasp it. In this sense, the argument for women’s equality is animated by the promise to unearth the proper meaning of the feminine, and to fix the relation of masculinity to femininity so that the entirety of humanity can finally be known. The difference of woman to man, as it is staged in this lineage, takes for granted a previous opposition between nature and—what is here just beginning to emerge as—culture. Contesting Tennyson’s dictum that “woman is not undeveloped man, but diverse,” Gilman proclaims that woman must indeed be recognized as undeveloped, but specifically in relation to the human rather than man (233). Tennyson’s articulation of woman as a difference to be apprehended on its own terms, an articulation that is presumably aligned with the feminist appeal for equality, is instead strikingly incommensurable with the terms through which Gilman establishes woman’s inclusion within humanity. In other words, the difference of woman must be cast as inequality, that is, as “subhuman,” “extra-human,” or a monstrous incarnation thereof, in order to appear within the boundaries of the human. Gilman’s revision of Tennyson’s phrase is telling in that it exposes the impossibility for sexual difference to be housed within the category of humanity, rather, woman’s claim to the human hinges upon the premise that her difference will be annulled as a function of evolution. In the conversation that ensues, Gilman challenges the conventional attribution of the “discrepancy” between men and women’s minds to the natural difference of sex:

“And [men] did not concern themselves much about this abysmal difference

between their minds, because it was not their minds that they married. So long as white men cheerfully, though temporarily, mate with African and Indian, Hawaiian and Filipino, we cannot expect them to be very critical about their wives' brains. The brains of women are less developed humanly, but their taste in selection is higher than man's." (Ceplair 233)

The argument that I seek to draw out by attending to the figures of race that erupt from the staging of woman as not-yet human is twofold. At one level, the invoking of racial difference to account for the inequality of men and women's minds is not incidental, or merely the mark of a racism that subtends Gilman's thought, but is rather elicited by the narrative of women's degradation itself. More specifically, the description of woman as incomplete and undeveloped stakes its ground upon the absolute difference of race to designate the proper outside to the human. At another level, in its relegation of (putting it crudely) interracial marriage to a necessary obstacle in the fulfillment of man, this passage performs the displacement of racial difference from the categories of "man" and "woman." In other words, the "African and Indian, Hawaiian and Filipino" is constituted on a terrain that is discontinuous with that of sexual difference. This can only be a clumsy articulation because the available concepts for describing the interaction of race and sexual difference (intersectionality serving as the symptomatic example) do not fully capture the ways in which the sealing of "man" and "woman" relies upon a passage through race. The "woman" that conducts the correct form of sexual selection (correct in that it is true to nature), that is, the woman produced by the terms of evolutionary biology, is consolidated in difference from the racially marked other. Even though woman is conceived in terms of inequality, a difference that is deemed "less developed humanly" by a logic of measure, she is recuperated into the humanity-of-the-future through her relationship to the race. Hence the subsequent sentences: "The brain difference remains a serious race disadvantage, however, whether men object to it or not. If white men continually married their Semgambian [sic] transients, and reared families by them, the race mind would be markedly affected" (Ceplair 233). Woman cannot appear under the sign of (to use the correct reference) the Senegambian, for the intelligibility of sexual difference in Gilman's frame displaces race into a parallel plane that, by definition, will never intersect. Feminist theory reproduces this structure whenever it invokes race as an analogy for gender, and represses it whenever the recognition of intersecting categories serves as the implicit solution to the exclusions of

“woman.”

The claim to women’s humanity, as Gilman poses it, is thus ultimately irreconcilable with a notion of universal equality. This implication is one that needs to be contended with, given the continued ways in which the case of women’s equality serves to bridge liberal democracy’s exclusionary past with the universal rights of the present. In the same way that Gilman poses woman’s rights as the barometer of civilization, the recognition of woman as equivalent to man is seen as the barometer for liberalism’s relationship to difference. Because woman is substitutable with any other difference, her inclusion is understood to be conceptually aligned with the inclusion of all those who reside on the margins. As the reading of Stanton in the last chapter sought to demonstrate, the argument for women’s suffrage was never an argument for equality, for in a most basic sense, it was made in the name of suppressing the minority. There, the concept of “the race” refracted through civilization provided the unifying ground for woman’s emergence as a difference requiring its own representation. Engaging with Gilman from this perspective further develops the notion that the appeal for woman’s uplift in the name of “improvement,” an evolution deemed necessary for the continuation of the species, produces a hierarchically structured notion of the social. The backdrop of “improvement” through which woman is made into a subject to be worked upon, attended to, and made equivalent, demands that the developed be separated from the undeveloped, and prescribes a future that belongs only to the productive. In contrast to a historicist approach that turns to context for explanation, this itinerary has sought to demonstrate that the commitment to racial hierarchies within key feminist texts is not supplemental, but rather constitutive to the thinking of “woman” that they each stage. At the broadest level, this means that the mapping of human evolution as racial evolution, and the concomitant appeal for “the race” to unite against degradation, is intimately woven into and emerges out of the conceptual architecture of women’s equality.

To that end, Gilman’s short essay titled “A Suggestion on the Negro Problem” calling for the establishment of labor camps for African American⁷⁵ men can only be thought as an aberration within the terms of historicism. While scholars such as Alys Eve Weinbaum refuse to separate out Gilman’s “racialized reproductive thinking,” but insist

⁷⁵ The replacement of the term “African-American” for “the negro” here is fraught given that, for Gilman, black subjects are—by nature—outside the nation.

that it is endemic to her feminism, there is a way in which even this provocative argument continues to corral the injunction to exteriorize (and effectively dispose) of the “inferior” as one that is specific to “her” feminism, hence a location and a time period, and that culminates in a correspondence between the vision of a feminist utopia and the eugenic imagination. Charting an itinerary offers one possible challenge to such a compartmentalization by sketching the repetition of patterns of thought across different constellations of concepts. The line that opens Gilman’s essay explicitly identifies civilization as a matter of racial difference: “Transfusion of blood is a simple matter compared with the transfusion of a civilization; yet that is precisely what is going on between us and the negro race” (Ceplair 176). The problem, Gilman continues, is how to accelerate the process given that the “presence of a large body of aliens, of a race widely dissimilar and in many respects inferior [...] is to us a social injury. If we had left them alone in their own country this dissimilarity and inferiority would be, so to speak, none of our business” (Ceplair 177). Significantly, the unity of the “us” that stands as the referent for civilization is premised upon the claim of “social injury” caused by the mere presence of difference, the identification of which enables the conflation of the social body with whiteness. At the same time, the violence of slavery casts its shadow over the lines of Gilman’s text, tracing irreducible lines of connection between the self and its inferior. It is therefore the logic of responsibility that positions the African-American as a problem to that demands a solution, a problem that implicates and demands engagement, that is, a problem that is “our business.” The point of dwelling on a text that, in many ways, can only appear unremarkable because all it offers are the marks of a classic and worn model of racial evolution, is to draw out the insidious ways in which it is bound up with the claim to woman’s humanity. What is clear from the very outset is that the understanding of responsibility put forth here is compatible, and indeed dependent upon, a relation of inequality. This necessary responsibility leads onto the following question:

The problem...is, What can we do to promote the development of the backward race so that it may become an advantageous element in the community? This is not a question of “equality” in any sense. Society is an organic relation, it is not composed of constituents all alike and equally developed, but most diverse and unequal. It is quite possible to have in society members far inferior to other members, but yet essential to the life of the whole. (Ceplair 178)

And so it is here, in an essay dedicated to the question of race, that the landscape of Gilman’s social is finally brought to the surface. Justifying the “development” of others

so that they may be “advantageous” to the community carries with it an understanding of society in which its members are radically and irreducibly unequal. Posing rights in the name of “improvement” understood as productivity, that is, in the name of being valuable to a society, is therefore premised upon an already assumed demarcation of the superior from the inferior. As Gilman very explicitly states, the imperative for an intervention is not a question of equality, but on the contrary, one that emerges out of the natural hierarchy that marks society. Although quickly written off as an example of archaic and mundane racism, the logic that underpins this call to “develop” the inferior race might not be so distant from that which structures the demand for universal women’s rights. As the next chapter aims to suggest, the argument for women’s rights that appeals to a universal definition of the human employs the same justification, albeit with a difference. What is revealed in this passage then, is that framing woman’s equality in relation to the good of society splits what it means to be a valuable, productive member off from the question of equality. In other words, this formulation of woman cannot think an equality for the margins, but only produces ever more margins in its wake.

Given that Gilman conceptualizes the “Negro Problem” as follows: “how can we best promote the civilization of the negro?,” it clearly recalls and resonates with her approach to sexual difference (Ceplair 179). At a broad level, this can be said to be the very question that is posed of woman, and that impels the drive towards allowing only those most suited for the task to reproduce. Although “woman” and the “negro” are both positioned as undeveloped in relation to civilization, they are not, however, constituted as parallel and equivalent subjects. Despite her current degradation, the proper position of “woman” is within the boundaries of civilization, while the “negro,” by contrast, is always already situated without. Indeed, the exclusion of racial difference, as has been argued throughout this study, is the necessary condition for woman’s entry into civilized humanity. While woman and the “negro” are both defined as unequal in relation to abstract man, reading within the lines of Gilman’s text brings forth a subtle but incommensurable difference between them. The problem presented by the figure of the African-American is that of a natural and immutable difference within the social body: “we put an end to the economic relations in which the negro had been held, and set him free; free—an alien race, in a foreign land; under social, economic, political and religious conditions to which he was by heredity a stranger” (Ceplair 177). The difference of the

African-American, then, is a difference of heredity inscribed in blood. Meanwhile, the difference of woman is produced and upheld by a society that reflects men's interests. As a result, woman's inequality originates from a cause exterior to her, while the African-American is beset by an innate inferiority. If woman carries the inheritance of the future, the conduit through which civilization will fulfill itself, the inheritance of the "negro" is that which must be annulled.

In order to "improve" the negro population in such a way that they are not only "self-supporting" but "a valuable part of the body politic," Gilman continues, those who fail to progress must be taken hold of by the state and "enlisted" into work camps (Ceplair 179). Structured as model farms, these camps will harness the agricultural labor of the "negro population" for which they are "best suit[ed]," including the production of cotton (Ceplair 179). Again, the point is not to remark on the excessive racism that exists alongside a politics dedicated to transforming woman's condition, but to think about how this relationship may be constitutive. The distinction that Gilman adamantly maintains between "enlistment" and "enslavement" rests upon the assertion that the former, in contradistinction to the latter, serves as a "rapid means of advancement" (Ceplair 179). As such, the ability to denounce the history of slavery while simultaneously calling for the establishment of mandatory work camps relies upon a presumed difference in their ends. As long as the objective is to "add... to their value as constituents of the body politic," the means is justified for the good of the individual as well as the good of society (181). What is to be made, then, of the fact that women's equality is defended on the same terms, and the potential future "value" of woman becomes the basis of recognizing her as an individual, a citizen and a fellow human? This chapter has attempted to draw out the stakes of this consonance not to indict individual feminists for their failures, but with the hope of offering a different approach to the relationship between race and sexual difference. Reading Gilman suggests that linking women's betterment to the state of society takes place within a civilizational frame that views others as needing to be brought up to their full potential. Arguments that take this justification as their organizing logic are therefore implicitly aligned with the production of the category of the subhuman, and moreover, are complicit with the imperative to measure and assign relative worth to those situated within the body politic. To put this somewhat polemically, the formulation of women's equality in terms of betterment is here shown to

be compatible with the “enlistment” of the inferior into a system of forced labor. The same appeal to “promote civilization” that enfolded woman into the human consigns another to work for their redemption. In the end, woman is claimed as part of society through a deferral that counters itself against a racial other, whose admission into civilization requires a transfusion akin to blood.

By way of a conclusion, I turn to Gilman’s utopian novella, *Herland*, and its imagining of a land of woman of “Aryan stock” as symptomatic of the attempt to settle the problematic of sexual difference through the categories of the masculine, the feminine and the human that has been the subject of this chapter. A recurring theme throughout her body of work, Gilman struggles to disarticulate a “true” femininity from the “false” meanings given to it by masculine or “androcentric” culture. Beginning from this premise, her work grapples with identifying the contours of masculinity so as to arrive at the real substance of humanity that unifies man and woman. The task undertaken in *Herland*, then, is to define the humanity of woman without simply equating this humanity with masculinity. Approached in this way, Gilman’s text attempts to answer the question that courses throughout the line of thinkers traced thus far: what would “woman” be if she was not defined by, or in relation to man? Or more to the point, what is the truth to the specific difference of woman? Given the preceding readings of Wollstonecraft and Stanton, it is not incidental that Gilman comes to pose the question of sexual difference in this way. As I have been suggesting thus far, the framework of (civilizational) progress demands an identification of the value conferred by woman’s difference, and hence a settling of the true meaning of the feminine. What I want to suggest here is that the eugenic vision put forth in *Herland* follows from the attempt to answer this question, and more specifically, to fix the truth of sexual difference within this constellation of terms. The rearticulation of the masculine and the feminine offered in *Herland*, as several scholars have pointed out, takes place through a reversal of their association with savagery and civilization, respectively. Hence the female society that the three male explorers stumble upon is narrated as more advanced, such that it is the men who must “develop to the level of the Herlanders before they are allowed to marry the indigenous women” (Nadkarni 223). In this sense, the relationship between masculinity and femininity posited by this text takes for granted an already established racial hierarchy. In her critical analysis of *Herland*, Alys Eve Weinbaum draws attention to the treatment of

race and gender that occurs when colonialism functions as a metaphor for patriarchy. She writes: “In Gilman’s novel as in its criticism, female superiority has a high cost—the subsumption of race within gender, and the feminization of civilization in the name of white womanhood” (291). She goes on to make the point that while gender and race intersect in Gilman’s narrative, this should not be mistaken for their alignment. Notably, the “...victory of feminine culture over male culture is secured through a prior coup, that of white women over subordinated masculine ‘savages’” (291). Weinbaum’s critique is suggestive in demonstrating the ways in which Gilman’s indebtedness to colonial scripts extends into feminist scholarship that proceeds with the assumption that the challenge to patriarchy and colonialism go hand-in-hand. By contrast, her argument suggests that the narration of feminine liberation provided by Gilman cannot be recuperated into a politics opposed to racism. Weinbaum demonstrates that the casting of the savage beyond the redemption of civilization is not a blind spot in the affirmation of woman’s potential, but rather that upon which the entire narrative is predicated. As a result, this raises serious questions about drawing lines of continuity, as she puts it, between “Gilman’s feminism and our own” (292). At the same time, there is perhaps more to be said about the configuration of woman in terms of race and the figure of the savage than Weinbaum’s account of the “subsumption of race within gender” allows for. This characterization suggests that race is erased, submerged and incorporated under the umbrella of sexual difference. The problem, however, is precisely that racial difference can only be thought as a discrete, self-identical category that is incommensurable with sexual difference. This is because race, as I have been attempting to draw out, is necessary to holding masculinity and femininity apart, while also unified under the heading of the human.

Descended from a single “race mother,” the inhabitants of Herland are said to reproduce parthogenetically.⁷⁶ What sustains this imagining of woman whose singular origin is woman is the search for the pure, uncontaminated meaning of sexual difference. In the isolated country of *Herland*, where the borders are completely sealed off and impenetrable to difference, the truth of woman will finally be attained. Revealed in this narrative, then, is that the imperative to identify the submerged truth of gender, which the structure of feminist claims continually deferred into a future that is yet to come, requires

⁷⁶ Bernice Hausman (1998) makes the point that in Gilman’s *Herland*, natural selection continues unimpeded by sexual selection.

the suturing of woman to whiteness. In other words, the dream of uncovering the originary and final account of the feminine, the truth that precedes society and the dominating influence of the masculine, does not call for the evacuation of race from the narrative grid. On the contrary, the absolute and incontestable meaning of sexual difference is achieved through the universalizing of woman under the sign of (in this case) the “Anglo-Saxon.” The attachment to woman’s true being, one imagined to always reside elsewhere and beneath the ever-changing constellation of terms that are affixed upon it, is therefore contingent upon the fixing of whiteness as the unmarked ground of the human. Whiteness is not seen to shape, or perhaps more appropriately—contaminate, the pure meaning of the feminine; all other “interacting variables,” to employ the language of the scientific experiment, must be eliminated from the picture.

Released from the pressures of sexual selection, the Herlanders are opposed to conventions of femininity with their “short hair, tunics, knee breaches and gaiters” (Weinbaum 288). This description of their physical appearance is telling in that it bears the mark of the struggle faced by the terms of the text, one that turns on the need to both reject the markers of femininity as the imposition of the masculine while at the same time recuperating the specific difference of woman. The androgynously dressed woman is the symptom of the search for an outside to this dyad. If Gilman works to retain the specificity of woman and not lose her within the generality of the human, the constitution of woman as mother can be read as emanating from this problematic. More specifically, motherhood grants woman access to a truth that exceeds the terms of masculinity and femininity. Caught in the bind that rejecting the conventional attributes of ideal femininity too easily collapses into an embrace of masculinity, Gilman looks to motherhood to fill the void of meaning that results. In Gilman’s utopia, the entire focus of the society is organized around the cultivation and development of “mother-power.” Driven by a ceaseless commitment to progress, the Herlanders collectively determine which members are best suited to bear and raise children. In this model society, the parsing of the social body into the fit and the unfit occurs through consensus, for those who must sacrifice do so willingly for the good of the whole. As the narrator Van intones, Herlanders are “Conscious Makers of People.” With them, “Mother-love...[is] not a brute passion, mere ‘instinct,’ a wholly personal feeling...[but is instead] a religion...that include[s] a limitless feeling of sisterhood, that wide unity of service that is

...National, Racial, [and] Human (58).” In this vision, there is perfect agreement between the interests of the individual and the interests of society, the means and the end of social improvement have been settled once and for all. All difference has been eradicated in order to bring forth the truth of woman.

In the end, then, the closing argument of this chapter is that Gilman’s ability to separate out the specific difference of “woman,” and to identify what is distinctive to this category in relation to “man” and the “human,” is entirely predicated upon the figure of the savage. Indeed, the glorification of the feminine that takes place in *Herland*, and the corresponding rejection of the masculine that has been the defining feature of a certain strand of feminism, is made intelligible through the binaried couplet of civilization and savagery. Beginning with the ironic exclamation of the narrator upon catching the first glimpse of *Herland*, “why this is a *civilized* country...there must be men,” the text unfolds as a demonstration that woman, in the absence of man, can achieve civilization. From the very outset, the savage lurks in the margins, a presence that is necessary to the account of woman that Gilman puts forth. Indeed, as one of the trio remarks about the view of the secluded land afforded from the biplane: “it’s a pretty enterprising savage who would manage to get into it” (9). Such details, as I have been working to articulate all along, are constitutive to the conceptual edifice of the text. Latent with the classic trademarks of the colonial imagination, the “first contact” with the Herlanders notably describes the inhabitants through recourse to the animal: the women are referred to as “bright creatures,” “arboreal people,” balancing on the boughs of trees, “...as bright and smooth as parrots and as unaware of danger” (13). The alignment of woman with the animal, a move that seeks an outside to the collapsing of masculinity with the human, is quickly balanced by a figure that exceeds these terms: “there was a torrent of soft talk tossed back and forth; no savage sing-song, but clear musical fluent speech” (13).⁷⁷ Although aligned with the animal, then, woman is constituted in difference from the savage. The rearrangement of the masculine and the feminine that Gilman undertakes in *Herland* cannot do without the savage as the difference that anchors civilization. As the text awkwardly struggles to offer an articulation of sexual difference that falls outside of

⁷⁷ It is also notable that the Herlanders have developed the discipline of anthropology, including “knowledge of the savagery of the occupants of those dim forests below” (54). Put succinctly, woman studies the savage, and is thus produced in difference from this figure.

“androcentrism,” the savage stands as a difference that is static and incontestable. Thus, while the content of woman is opened up to question, and emerges as conspicuously unstable and uncertain, the steady nature of the savage can be taken for granted. The disorientating absence of meaning that surrounds woman comes through in Jeff’s assertion: “...these women aren’t *womanly*. You know they aren’t (50).” The struggle to find an alternative leaves woman without any stable ground: “These women...were strikingly deficient in what we call ‘femininity.’ This led me very promptly to the conviction that those ‘feminine charms’ we are so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity” (50). The possibility of woman to be constituted as a flexible category, one that is subject to change and whose true meaning resides in the future, is thus tied to the stark and undifferentiated alterity of the savage.

Reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman through the earlier lineage of Wollstonecraft and Stanton, as this chapter has attempted to suggest, provides a challenge to the classification of eugenics as an ideology that can be safely lodged within the confines of a time period in American history. Within critical revisionist histories, the reliance on this ordering typology means that the recognition of Gilman’s racism can also unwittingly prop up a progress narrative that conceals the ongoing legacies of eugenic thought. In particular, the racial inflections that lend meaning to what counts as a “valuable” life is one that, as the concluding chapter will further trace out, continues to provide a structure and justificatory end for the claim to human rights. Positioned alongside Wollstonecraft and Stanton, Gilman’s linkage of women’s equality to the betterment of the social, understood as the eradication of difference, can be seen as the constitutive feature of a longer train of feminist thought. Brought together, these three chapters build the argument that calling for a change in women’s condition in terms of its value to society, and correspondingly as a contribution to the fulfillment of humanity, relies upon a logic of racial evolution. By consequence, woman can only be constituted as a subject of civilization, and implicitly whiteness. If the consolidation of the category of “woman” has been shown to require a passage through racial difference, including the concept of civilization and its related iterations, then the accompanying point is that the architecture of eugenic thought also cannot do without sexual difference. Put otherwise, the notion of society and its future that sustains the eugenic impulse to limit reproduction to the “fit” also crucially relies upon the coherence of “woman.” As I have been tracing across this

dissertation, it is woman's degradation that provides the underlying unity to the collective as well as a measure for its progress. Gilman's efforts to extricate the meaning of the human from masculinity and femininity takes place within the contours of this collectivity, which following Stanton is given the name of "the race." In contrast to the conventional historicizing of the eugenics movement, it is now possible to conceptualize the imperative to demarcate an underlying ground to each of these categories (masculine, feminine, human) as itself productive of the eugenic drive for purity. The claim to woman's humanity is thus ultimately refracted through, an inseparable from, the suturing of the human to the white race. This is the inheritance that is ultimately carried into appeals to human rights—and what a feminism that opposes the measuring of life in terms of race must first contend with before imagining other horizons of equality.

Universalizing Women's Rights: the Civilizational Architecture of Human Rights

The mobilization of “women’s rights as human rights” has gained increasing prominence on the global stage, often serving as a point of consensus unifying positions across the political spectrum. In the modalities of imperialism that accompany the “war on terror,” for example, the concern for women’s condition ‘elsewhere’ created unexpected allegiances between the Bush regime and the Feminist Majority Foundation in the US. The articulation of women’s human rights, an articulation that is indebted to liberalism’s conception of the subject and its figuration of freedom, has in many ways come to stand as the universal and global definition of feminism. For this reason, it is all the more pressing to contend with the thinking of “woman” that the “human rights regime,” to use Inderpal Grewal’s phrase, inherits from the lineage of liberal feminism traced by this dissertation. In particular, the rationale for universalizing women’s rights continues to be deeply indebted to Mary Wollstonecraft’s conceptualization of the problem and its solution laid out in the first chapter. The exclusions that accompanied her civilizational frame are therefore also carried into contemporary mobilizations, although rearticulated and repeated in ways that render it all the more difficult to recognize the enduring hold of a racially demarcated humanity. This chapter focuses on the work of Martha Nussbaum, given her prominence in the international arena and the reputation she has garnered as an influential theorist of women’s human rights. Although the following point is by now hopefully clear, this focus on Nussbaum should not be mistaken as a critique of her in particular, nor an indictment of her intentions. Rather, the purpose is to offer an engagement with a framework that circulates as the global platform of feminism, and that draws its conceptual roots from the particular strain of feminism that has been institutionalized by the discipline of women’s studies in the US academy. Nussbaum lays out the theoretical backing for the universalizing of women’s rights in her book titled *Sex and Social Justice*, which will be the focus of this chapter.

Martha Nussbaum locates herself within the camp of liberal feminism to make the argument for women’s human rights, a position that she characterizes as committed to “universalism” as opposed to “cultural relativism.” Drawing upon what she identifies as the distinguishing features of liberal thought, Nussbaum articulates a platform of universal rights that aim to secure the recognition of women as “fully human.” It is

through an enumeration of the defining features of the human, a numbered list she has titled the “central human capabilities,” that Nussbaum sees the possibility for defending women’s equality on the global stage. In this sense, the problematic that she begins from, that of inserting “woman” within the category of the “human,” closely follows from the lineage of feminist thought traced by this dissertation. As this chapter will suggest, the way in which Nussbaum conceptualizes the problem of women’s oppression, and the solution that she proposes in the form of a universal platform of women’s rights, inherits the conceptual structure of civilizational progress that subtends this strand of feminism, as well as the constitutive exclusions that accompany it. In particular, the logic of race that underlies the justification for women’s rights in the writings of Wollstonecraft, Stanton and Gilman continues to provide the enabling ground for Nussbaum’s framework. The production of racial difference that accompanied woman’s entry into the domain of reason is here rearticulated, albeit with a difference. Therefore, although the pairing of civilization and savagery is no longer explicitly present within this staging of women’s rights as human rights, the traces of this conceptual edifice can be found in a difference that is beholden to “cultural tradition.” Indeed, the necessity for establishing consensus on the universal condition of being human is premised upon the specter of a racial other who is ruled by “culture,” and therefore cannot be trusted to command the same respect for women. Resonating with the lineage of liberal feminism that precedes her, women’s inequality in Nussbaum’s work is rendered intelligible as the mark of racial difference, such that patriarchy (once again) circulates as the natural condition of the other.

The culminating chapter of this study suggests that the appeal to the universality of women’s rights is ultimately predicated upon an implicit distinction between the benefactors of feminist politics and those destined to be its recipients, a distinction that is refracted through the opposition between the civilized and the uncivilized. In drawing out the ways in which the model of women’s rights as human rights remains inscribed within a framework of racial hierarchy, the question that this chapter grapples with is also (at the broadest level) that of the complicity between feminism and imperialism. The contemporary landscape of global politics that comes to bear upon this inquiry is one in which concern for women’s rights provides the recurring rationale for violent military as well as policy interventions that variously cast themselves under the umbrella of

humanitarianism. Although these invocations of concern for women's rights have been challenged by the political left for being unethical "misuses" of feminism and a cover for the expansion of US imperialism, there is perhaps another responsibility that remains to be contended with. In short, there may be traces within feminism that makes way and lends itself to such deployments. If the landscape that emerges from Nussbaum's articulation of women's human rights, that is, of a world divided between those who represent a commitment to rights and those subject to the vagaries of oppressive traditions, then this division (which is also implicated in defining who represents the human) may itself emerge from the category of "woman." As such, a feminism that remains bound to the circulation of "woman" as a universal category, and that attempts to intervene at the level of the global by laying claim to equality within the human, will always confront the problem of having to demarcate the boundaries of such a humanity. Furthermore, such a feminism will continue to assume whiteness as the underlying ground of "woman," and consequently pose this subject as the proper agent of feminism. The split, to employ Spivak's words, between those who "right wrongs" and those who are perpetually destined to wrong, a split that also invokes and reproduces the eugenic separation between the fit and the unfit, is therefore carried within a feminism that appeals to the abstract category of the human.⁷⁸

Opposing Relativism through Universalism

If this reading of Nussbaum's work is oriented towards tracing the ways in which her articulation of women's equality relies upon racial difference for its coherence, the objective of such an engagement is not charge human rights with Eurocentrism. To invoke Spivak's argument from "Righting Wrongs," this move would be disingenuous precisely because it claims a position outside from which to offer such a denouncement. In addition, to adopt a stance that merely rejects the claim to women's human rights also operates with a model of politics that takes the declaration or withholding of affirmation as its end. Put otherwise, it reduces the problem of women's human rights into one of agreement or disagreement. The question of human rights, and women's human rights more specifically, is one that must be worked upon exactly because it cannot be done

⁷⁸ In Spivak (2008), "Righting Wrongs-2002: Accessing Democracy Among the Aboriginals."

away with, for in the most basic of ways, people's lives depend upon it. In struggling over the limitations of Nussbaum's theory of what she has sometimes called "feminism as humanism," then, the purpose is to engage with a model of feminist politics that explicitly aligns itself with the critiques put forth by women of color and postcolonial feminists. In this sense, Nussbaum's articulation of feminism demands interrogation exactly because it comes from a political position that is opposed to imperialism and racism, as well as a multiculturalism that merely "tolerates" without any sense of responsibility to the other. The structure of *Sex and Social Justice* begins by laying out the existing critiques of universalism and liberal feminism before setting out the tenets of the "Central Human Capabilities," an approach that locates itself at the intersection of these traditions. From its very organizational logic, Nussbaum's style of argumentation is one that aims towards an exhaustive totality, in the sense of having covered the entire ground of a position such as universalism. In this classic structure of critique and refutation, the assumption is that all relevant challenges have been given space and taken into account.

Noting how the terms of the conversation are set in Nussbaum's text is significant in that she constantly provides the illusion that all possibilities have been accounted for, while at the same time foreclosing other ways of thinking. Exemplifying this move, the book conceives of the engagement with difference as a choice between universalism and cultural relativism. The charge against universalism, according to Nussbaum's summary, is the risk of Western imperialism. To illustrate the flaws of an anti-universalist stance, Nussbaum narrates the scene of a conversation following the conference paper of an unnamed scholar calling for the "preservation of traditional ways of life in a rural area of Orissa, India...under threat of contamination from Western development projects" (35). An example of such traditions given in the paper is the refusal to abide by different values in the workplace and the home, as in the case of menstruating women who are equally barred from the kitchen as well as contact with the looms. After feminists in the audience voice protests at the initial assumption that traditions which view a woman's body as polluted should be preserved at all, the collaborator (by way of Nussbaum) responds: "Don't we realize that there is, in these matters, no privileged place to stand? This, after all, has been shown by both Derrida and Foucault. Doesn't he know that he is neglecting the otherness of Indian ideas by bringing his Western essentialist values into

the picture” (35)? This anecdote is worth citing at length because it is symptomatic of how Nussbaum reckons with the problem of imperialism as it presents itself within the claim to universalism. The subsequent paper in the panel, as relayed by Nussbaum, “expresse[d] regret” that the introduction of the smallpox vaccination in India on the part of the British brought about the demise of the cult of Sittala Devi, the goddess seen as responsible for averting small pox (35). Her response as a member of the audience that it is “surely better” to be healthy rather than sick, to be alive rather than dead, is met with the accusation that such a stance is exemplary of Western essentialism and does not make way for the “otherness of Indian traditions” (35). While it is obvious that Nussbaum is taking liberties in order to make her case, there are a few important points to be taken from her narration of this exchange. The first notable move made by this account is to consolidate universalism as the only position from which to recognize and thus oppose violence and marginalization. A challenge to universalism, in this sense, can only take the form of a seemingly comedic collapsing of all difference, such that life can no longer be counted on to be valued above death. To complicate universalism, then, is to produce nothing less than complete chaos, the loss of any shared commitments, or perhaps most succinctly, the possibility of consensus about what constitutes a human life. Indeed, the anxiety that is staged here is precisely that the agreement over the desire for life itself can no longer be taken for granted when the implications of postcolonial criticism are taken to their end. In sum, the concern with what Nussbaum glosses as the “Western neglect of difference” leads to the inability to advocate for the other’s life over their death.

To shift the conversation on the legacies of colonialism into a polarized terrain with clear questions and answers (health is better than sickness, life is better than death) is an all too familiar response, and one that effectively shuts down any consideration of the more vexed implications of such “humanitarian” interventions. It is also indicative of the ways in which Nussbaum characterizes feminist critique, and the issues that it raises in relation to gendered relations of power. To that end, the second move performed by this account is to implicitly locate feminism as exterior to, and in contradiction with, what is marked as “traditional ways of life.” As such, to support the feminist opposition to the valuing of women’s bodies in terms of purity and pollution, a set of meanings that contributes to gendered forms of subordination, requires a rejection of the “traditional” that carries the name of the “rural” in “Orissa, India.” What I am working to sketch out

here is the set of oppositions that form the backdrop of this conversation, a backdrop that produces a division between the West and the traditional, and that aligns the former with feminism, health, and life, and the latter with patriarchy, disease and death. Such a landscape, then, cannot engage with ideas of purity as other than the product of primordial traditions. This continues to obscure how tropes of purity and contamination are not external to feminism, but on the contrary, central to the ways in which women's rights, equality and freedom have been consolidated. The terms put forth by this account demand that one select a camp and take a stand, either for or against feminism, for or against life-saving vaccines, and hence, for or against life itself.

In drawing out the limits of the cultural relativist position, Nussbaum points to the problems with the appeal to authenticity and its accompanying understanding of culture as static and unchanging, a body of critique that has been one of the central contributions of postcolonial feminism.⁷⁹ From that regard, she rightly argues that the disengagement that is performed in the name of “respecting cultural difference” takes for granted that cultures are discrete and self-same entities that can be neatly cordoned off from one another. Moreover, this view of the world, one that locates difference between rather than within the grouping of “culture,” fails to contend with the relations of power that shape which ideas and practices become representative of “tradition.” The category of “tradition” comes to unravel, Nussbaum contends, when we look further into the influences that inform any set of ideas. By way of example, she again describes the scene of a conference where, in her words, “Western feminist scholars” and “Chinese scholars in women's studies” were brought together (8). Here she narrates how a scholar from Hong Kong who looked to the Confucian tradition for the grounding principles of Chinese feminism was accused of being “Western” by the other Chinese scholars in the room, who purportedly viewed Confucianism as “a living source of humiliation and disempowerment” (9). From this anecdote, Nussbaum surmises:

Where did they locate their tradition? In their own critical thought and work, in the efforts of women to win respect within history—but also in John Stuart Mill, whose *The Subjection of Women*, translated into Chinese early in the twentieth century, is a primary source of the Chinese feminist tradition. What is East and what is West? What is the tradition of a person who is fighting for freedom and empowerment? Why should one's group be assumed to be the ethnic or religious group of one's birth? Might it not, if one so chooses, be, or become, the

⁷⁹ For a critique of “culture” and authenticity see: Trinh (1989), Grewal and Kaplan (1996), Spivak (1999)

international group of women—or of people who respect the equality and dignity of women? (9)

This passage is again worth dwelling on because it performs a series of conceptual moves that have deep reverberations for how the category of “woman” comes to be constituted in Nussbaum’s framework. While on the surface this series of questions seems to interrogate the linking of ideas concerning woman’s condition to a monolithic notion of race or ethnicity, the consequence is in fact a reconsolidation of such notions, as embedded in the coherency of a category such as “Chinese feminism.” At the broadest level, this line of interrogation stages an inviolable separation between self and other, between “these women,” “their tradition,” “their critical thought and work” and the implicit “us” that is aligned with a universal, unmarked feminism. It is not inconsequential that John Stuart Mill is posed as the “primary source” of Chinese feminism, for the assumption that underlies Nussbaum’s analysis is consistently that the true ideals of women’s equality and freedom come from liberal thought (also implicitly marked as “Western”). Therefore, although Nussbaum appears to reject the idea of circumscribable “traditions,” and their accompanying ascription to racial categories, it is more the case that she keeps this backdrop intact and merely allows for movement between such groupings. Rather than assuming the “ethnic or religious group of one’s birth,” as the passage above argues, one may instead “choose” another grouping that actually respects the equality of women. In the end, Nussbaum leaves the category of “tradition” firmly in place, and divides the landscape of the global into (racial) groups that respect women, and those that do not.

If the conclusion that Nussbaum draws from her reading of the conversation on the relationship between feminism and Confucianism is that the membership to be claimed is one of belonging to an international group of women, respectful of the “equality and dignity of women,” then the question arises of to whom (or more precisely, which group) is such equality proper to? Given the ideological terrain that Nussbaum sketches out, the meaning of what constitutes women’s equality and dignity is assumed to be already known, and hence already in place within a given tradition. The content of “respect for women’s equality and dignity,” in other words, is not taken as open or an indeterminate source of contention. Instead, the definition of women’s equality is already fixed, and what remains is either to affirm or negate it. As we will see throughout this

reading of Nussbaum's work, liberal thought is understood to be the true bearer of universal equality, and hence the organizing ground for what is posed as the "international group of women." Significantly, the emergence of a universal feminist platform, one that takes women's human rights as its cause, can only be conceived as a return to an already settled set of meanings. The universal affirmation of women's rights, to put it most bluntly, takes the form of affirming ideas that are already in place within liberalism. Those situated outside of liberal thought by nothing less than a logic of blood--those indelibly inscribed with the name of a "Chinese feminist tradition"-- must effect this return as a displacement to another tradition. In many ways, this is nothing but a repetition of the colonial assumption that feminism and women's rights must be brought to some (racialized) subjects from the outside.

Returning to the category of the "Chinese feminist tradition," as it is produced in the passage quoted earlier, provides an avenue into contending with the ways in which Nussbaum stages universalism as an alternative to cultural relativism. What is at stake, it must be asked, of holding onto the category of "Chinese feminism" in the frame of an argument calling for the recognition of a universal feminism, a feminism as humanism? What is the relationship between this "Chinese feminism" and the feminism that informs the international group of women committed to women's equality? And, more specifically, what does it mean to make sense of feminism in terms of an "ethnic supplement," to use Rey Chow's words, that is, to attach an ethnic category as a qualifier to feminism? In her piece titled "On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem," Chow specifically considers how the category "Chinese" is produced and invested with meaning when it is appended to terms like history, literature, philosophy or feminism. In many ways, the specification instituted through the category "Chinese" functions as a response to the critique of Eurocentrism, and the displacement of the West as the universal that has served as one of its defining features. To invoke the category "Chinese" in relation to feminism is therefore a gesture that aims to correct the previous erasure that occurred when white women stood in for all women. More broadly, this can be said to be the logic of multiculturalism, which recognizes that literature, philosophy and feminism can no longer be talked of in the singular, and corrects this prior oversight by including difference through the confines of ethnic categories. Chow makes the point that the "ethnic supplement" carries in it a burden of representation, for what follows is

understood to reflect the truth of a category such as “Chinese.” As Laura Kang has argued in relation to *Woman Warrior*, this results in “ethnic literature” being read in the documentary mode, such that works of fiction come to be inflected with “geopolitical realism.”⁸⁰ To use “Chinese” as a qualifier, then, for anything ranging from ideologies to behaviors to forms of political governance, constitutes an effort to fix and locate the meaning of ethnicity. Put otherwise, the work of the ethnic supplement is to provide a stable essence to race, here in the form of defining and pinning down the content of Chineseness. As Chow draws out in her piece, the imperative to establish the true meaning of the category “Chinese” destines people to a certain way of thinking, acting, and behaving based upon ethnicity, a logic that is no different than that of scientific racism.

When Nussbaum invokes the “Chinese feminist tradition” in the passage above, then, what is at stake is not only the stabilizing of an ethnic category, but also the suturing of feminism to categories of cultural difference. Put otherwise, this move locates feminism within the boundaries of race, which assumes that understandings of sexual difference and the forms of gendered power that accompany them are linked to categories such as “China.” Although, on the one hand, the naming of the “Chinese feminist tradition” appears to innocently specify a general category, and in so doing, display attentiveness to the ethnocentrism of an unmarked “feminism,” this same gesture effectively reinscribes a logic of race that is tied to criteria of authenticity. Even though Nussbaum’s agenda is precisely that of challenging notions of purity that mark liberal feminism as proper to, or belonging to the “West,” the problem of what serves as the referent to “Chinese” still remains. In other words, what is the assumed underlying unity to “Chinese,” the substance that marks its origin before it is thrown open to “outside influences,” and made different from itself? The coherence that holds the concept of a “Chinese feminist tradition” together relies upon the acceptance that “China” has a meaning that is proper to it. For this reason, the move to include and recognize difference within feminism, to render it plural by way of ethnic difference, does not ultimately pose a challenge to the presumed universality of the white subject. This is because the other remains entirely determined by their category of difference. As such,

⁸⁰Kang makes this argument in the chapter titled “Generic Fixations: Reading the Writing Self” in her book *Compositional Subjects*.

“Chinese feminists” carry the burden of representing Chinese difference, and this difference is also what lends significance to their contributions.

The question posed earlier regarding the relationship between the “Chinese feminist tradition” and the universal feminism advocated by Nussbaum can perhaps now be better elucidated. To begin, the “international group of women” committed to principles of equality is posed in opposition to groups specified by race. Therefore, while membership is made available to all, the subject of this universal feminism is implicitly defined as white. The feminism that appears under the banner of humanism, then, is also circuted through race in that it assumes a white subject as its organizing ground. As Diane Elam (1994) argues in her book *Feminism and Deconstruction*, to pose “woman” as the subject of feminism immediately runs into the problem of defining the underlying commonality that binds women together.⁸¹ Demarcating the boundaries of this subject is an undertaking that is necessarily exclusionary, in addition to trafficking in the logic of authenticity. The enumeration of the substance of “woman”—by way of experience, interests, sexuality or otherwise—results in a hierarchy of posing some subjects as not only more woman, but also more human than others. To that end, the staging of this “international” group that will purportedly represent the interest of all women assumes there is an identity to “woman” that exists prior to politics. In such a way, the appeal to “women’s interests” produces “woman” as a coherent identity with unified interests that are known in advance, and simply await representation. Those that fail to agree with these interests, according to Nussbaum, have yet to experience the full freedom of “choice.” Although this argument will be developed further, these belated figures of feminism are ruled by culture and tradition, as opposed to the free and autonomous subjects that stand as representatives of the respect for women’s equality and dignity.

A feminism that assumes the prior existence of women, Elam contends, collapses woman with truth and seeks to establish positive knowledge about sexual difference. In her words, “a feminism that believes it knows what a woman is and what she can do both forecloses the limitless possibilities of women and misrepresents the various forms that social injustice can take” (32). She puts the task of feminism as that of keeping the category of “woman” open as a permanently contested site of meaning. For Elam, the coherence of feminism lies in the undecidable: “as feminists, we are all concerned about

⁸¹ See her chapter titled “Questions of Women.”

women, yet we do not know what they are. And what binds us together is the fact that we do not know” (84). In contrast to the assumed consensus of meaning that organizes Nussbaum’s universal feminism, Elam poses the unknown as that which is held in common. I bring Elam in at this juncture to gesture towards the concept of politics that is foreclosed within Nussbaum’s frame, as well as to think further about the limitations of equating woman with truth. As this itinerary of liberal feminism has traced, the argument for women’s rights and equality has been made in the name of finding and establishing the truth of woman, once and for all. Under the existing conditions of subjugation, to paraphrase Wollstonecraft, Stanton and Gilman, the true nature of woman cannot be known. The vision of a future in which this truth will finally be attained, as these last chapters have worked to trace, serves as the rationale and endpoint of women’s equality. When situated within this lineage, Nussbaum’s appeal for the creation of an “international group of women” can be seen to rest on the same imperative to fix and stabilize women’s truth. Moreover, the work of charting this lineage provides the possibility of extending Elam’s account of the implications of this will to truth, which are only loosely captured in the above as “misrepresent[ing] the various forms that social injustice can take.” Given that Elam is otherwise critical of the demand to provide a more complete or total representation, her assessment seems to beg further elaboration. In particular, this reading of Nussbaum will work to suggest that assuming a substance to “woman,” as in the articulation of women’s human rights, requires a displacement of difference from its borders. Put otherwise, Nussbaum’s staging of “woman,” and the accompanying belief that a fully liberated self exists beneath the forces of oppression, relies upon the production of racial difference to render coherent the defining attributes of this subject. In particular, the confirmation that “women [are] seen as fully human” rests upon the self-evidence of choice, freedom, and equality, all concepts that are circuited through race (9).

As we have seen up to this point, Nussbaum’s defense of a “universalist project,” as she describes the platform for women’s human rights, begins from a recognition of the “variety within groups, cultures, traditions” (8). Therefore, it is presumably an attention to difference that leads her to dismiss the view of monolithic and self-enclosed cultures associated with cultural relativism. Nussbaum’s response to critiques of Eurocentrism and Western imperialism, then, is to say that the universalizing of liberal principles can

be claimed by and become anyone's "tradition." At the same time, however, the conception of universal equality throughout her text is consistently opposed to markers of race and ethnicity. The narrative that opens *Sex and Social Justice* is tellingly set in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and recounts the struggles of a woman named Saleha Begum to gain employment outside the home. Aided by support from an NGO and the United Nations World Food Program, the text relates how she won the right to be employed and subsequently organized a local group of women to become financially independent. The terms of the story pits global institutions against "local community norms," and culminates in Saleha's (Nussbaum's focus on the individual through the use of the proper name itself functions to deflect attention away from the racialized landscape of the argument) campaign for political office, which although unsuccessful, "was taken as a victory for women in that region" (3). The fight for women's equality is thus waged against the signifiers of difference—Bangladesh, community norms, "that region." As a result, this opening narrative does the work of consolidating racialized difference as the cause of women's marginalization, while also parading the right to work and participation in electoral politics as the signposts of liberation. The notion of cultural difference tied to cohesive "traditions" is not only firmly in place, but absolutely crucial to the structure of Nussbaum's argument. The justification for universalism, in other words, is rooted in the essential and insurmountable misogyny of the other.

To conclude this section, the contrast between universalism and cultural relativism that subtends Nussbaum's support for a universal definition of the human performs a series of erasures. At the broadest level, setting up these positions as conflictual obscures the shared ground between them, and maintains the fiction that they offer opposing conceptualizations and understandings of difference. Instead, they both conceive of the world in terms of discrete cultures linked to primordial traditions. These "traditions," that are the product of a culture, a people, and implicitly a race, carry the foundations of women's oppression. In the case of liberalism, however, the tradition that is proper to it practices freedom and equality. Even though Nussbaum is adamant about challenging the notion that liberal principles inherently belong to any particular group of people, the text consistently collapses the recognition of woman's humanity with sociological referents—America, the "West," "European and North American culture." As such, the understanding of the human that is to be universalized emerges as the

property, the own-most, of an empirical group of people. What results from this conceptual backdrop, then, is a division between those naturally endowed with the practice of humanism, and those who can only reach such enlightenment after rejecting their own tradition. If there are still changes to be made to liberalism, notably in respect to incorporating the insights of feminism, these critiques only bring liberalism back to itself: “[liberalism] will be changed in ways that make it more deeply consistent with its own foundational ideas” (57). For Nussbaum, liberalism already contains the potential for universal equality within itself and merely awaits its adequate fulfillment. To follow liberal thought to its end, then, will expand the boundaries of the human to all those that have been previously excluded. This view explains the persistent hierarchy of humanity as a contaminating influence, the sign of difference infiltrating its borders and rendering liberalism different from itself. Put simply, Nussbaum does not conceptualize these exclusions as belonging to the structure of liberalism, but rather as aberrations that come from without. As this dissertation has worked to demonstrate, such an understanding fails to come to terms with the way in which the human is constituted as civilized within the framework of natural rights, and is therefore indebted to the figure of the savage who cannot, by definition, be granted full humanity.

The Human in the “Central Human Capabilities”

Having explained why the risk of being charged with Western imperialism is “worth it,” an engagement with politics that appeals to the logic of measure, Nussbaum lays out her “Central Human Capabilities,” a list that aims to define what counts as a “functioning human life” (34). If this universal position is necessary to counter the vagaries of cultural traditions, which left to their own devices cannot be trusted to respect human life, the next question to consider is the character of Nussbaum’s universalism. In what way is this universal definition of the human opposed to the particular? What, in other words, constitutes the particular which the universal then comes to supplement, revise and correct? To ask this series of questions is an effort to move past the argument that Nussbaum’s universalism covers its own specific conditions of emergence, or the tradition of thought from which it draws. Indeed, any claim to the universal is always the particular displacing itself as such, often accompanied by a denial of the blind spots and

limitations of its perspective. However, to stop at the charge that Nussbaum's definition of the human is "Western" or specific to the liberal tradition of political thought remains bound to the notion of origins, and hence cannot be enough. First and foremost Nussbaum herself does not retreat from this point, but quite to the contrary, claims liberalism as the political tradition that is simply the best suited for affirming the equality of women. In addition, such a response maintains the distinction between the West and the non-West, and the accompanying ascription of political ideologies to the essence of a people. This next section will work to draw out how the human that passes as abstract and universal in Nussbaum's framework continues to be circuited through sexual and racial difference. The struggle to insert woman within the human, a struggle that this study has traced through the lineage of natural rights, once again produces a series of exclusions that come to be figured through race. The narrative of Saleha Begum that founds and sustains Nussbaum's text delineates the contours of civilization, the difference that is to be redeemed by the abstract human in the "Central Human Capabilities."

The project of the capabilities approach is, quite literally, to define the human. To restate the central argument of *Sex and Social Justice*, delineating the constitutive features of a human life is necessary to secure human rights for women because some cultures do not believe in gender equality. Nussbaum distinguishes her specific articulation of human rights from the utilitarian and Rawlsian frameworks, which she faults for not taking into account the role of tradition in shaping quality of life. In contrast to these other frameworks, Nussbaum maintains that the expressed preferences and desires of individuals cannot be taken for granted because they may be "deformed in various ways" by customs, culture, and oppression (34). As a result, the capabilities approach offers a way to contend with the relationship between "tradition and women's equality" (32). Although Rawls, in Nussbaum's assessment, does not assume preferences as given, his model of the distribution of essential goods and resources fails to take into account the unique needs that determine an individual's ability to function. For example, she notes: "a person in a wheelchair will need more resources to become mobile than a person with unimpaired limbs; a woman in a society that has defined employment outside the home as off limits to women needs more resources to become a productive worker... (34)." The parallel that she draws here is worth unpacking for several reasons. First, what allows these two examples to fall within the same frame and appear as essentially

interchangeable cases of needing “more resources,” is difference from the normative human. As such, the notion that some lives need greater accommodation, more “resources,” in order to be fully human reveals the specificity that marks the abstract individual. In addition to being able-bodied, as this passage makes clear, the text will continue to bear witness to the ways in which the contours of the universal human are drawn. To take a step back from the details of Nussbaum’s argument, her engagement with difference is to view it as inequality, a deficiency to be addressed and corrected through the channeling of resources. Put in barest terms, those that diverge from the normative human need to be brought up to the level of a proper existence, and this is achieved through equivalence, by being rendered (as close as possible) into the same. The multiplication of “resources,” as this example demonstrates, promises to make physical disability meaningless. From this perspective, then, the solution to equality is to make difference irrelevant by way of structural transformations.⁸² When placed in the same chain, the woman that belongs to “another society” is also constituted as life that needs to be brought to its full potential, a formulation that has been the driving imperative of colonial projects. The woman of “this society,” who implicitly serves as the reference point for measuring the use of “more” or “less” resources,” consequently stands in for the human. As the text continuously demonstrates, the society that relegates woman to the home is inflected by geopolitical difference, a difference that takes the place of race as the origin of patriarchy. Of course, the idea that freedom resides in employment and becoming a “productive worker” is also significant here, in that it serves to draw the line between women who are recognized as fully human and those that are not. The universal woman who is the subject of human rights is thus consolidated in difference from the woman that suffers the repression of an oppressive society, a distinction that draws upon and rearticulates the boundaries of civilization.

The list of basic capabilities that follows from Nussbaum’s argument for a universal conception of the human answers the following question: “what are the

⁸² The film *Examined Life* (2010) includes interviews with both Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler on questions surrounding disability. In her segment with disability scholar Sunaura Taylor, Butler offers reflections on the issues raised by physical disability that provides a sharp contrast to Nussbaum’s emphasis on eliminating difference through structural change. For example, Butler suggests that thinking from the perspective of disability challenges the ideal of self-sufficiency, and imagines a world in which we are mutually dependent on one another’s help. This serves as a reminder of the other possibilities for thinking and engaging with the world that are continually foreclosed by Nussbaum’s universalism.

functions without which (meaning, without the availability of which) we would regard a life as not, or not fully, human (39)?" From the very outset, the list explicitly seeks to draw lines of inclusion and exclusion, and establish some lives as more human than others. The question that guides this undertaking engages with the human as a form of measure, thereby instating a hierarchy of humanity and producing the category of the inhuman in its wake. This imperative to evaluate and determine relative levels of human-ness harkens back to an early passage in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Man-Made World*, cited in the previous chapter. To recall, Gilman lays claim to woman's humanity by establishing the truth of human-ness, separate from the social meanings attached to masculinity and femininity. This leads her to the following reflection: "The nomad, living on cattle as ants live on theirs, is less human than the farmer, raising food by intelligently applied labor; and the extension of trade and commerce, from mere village market-places to the world-exchanges of today, is an extension of human-ness as well" (MMW 16). As we saw there, the measuring of lives as "more" and "less" human led to the distinction between the fit and the unfit, a distinction that prescribes the elimination of the inferior and carries along with it the vision of a racially pure future. Taking note of these parallels points to the underlying logics that are at play in defining the truth of the human, but remain otherwise hidden from view in Nussbaum's text. While the human capabilities list does not perhaps display the recognizable features of eugenic thought, it nevertheless remains beholden to an understanding of the human that bestializes difference, and consequently justifies violence against those that fail to meet the criteria for "full" humanity.

The extensive series of caveats that preface the capabilities list expose the conflicts that erupt in this effort to fix and stabilize the category of the human. As Nussbaum notes, any attempt to produce such a list is "bound to enshrine certain understandings of the human and demote others" (38). This fact, however, for her merely confirms the need for universalism, given that "others" do not share the same recognition of oppression and deprivation, and presumably would not include woman within the "fully" human. And yet, the justification for the list grounds itself upon consensus: "the point of the list is...to put forward something that people from many different traditions, with many different fuller conceptions of the good, can agree on, as the necessary basis for pursuing their good life" (40). To be human, then, is to agree with the definition put

forth by Nussbaum. Posing consensus as the underlying ground of the human is dangerous in that disagreement, dissent, and difference effectively become the mark of the inhuman. This staging of an agreement over what constitutes human life looks towards a horizon where the human will no longer be a site of struggle, when complete and total representation will finally be achieved.⁸³ Nussbaum further elaborates that the capabilities list strives for more than “mere bare humanness,” and hence what is enumerated is a particular kind of life. In her words, “we do not want politics to take mere survival as its goal,” but rather the purpose is to secure “fully human functioning” or “a kind of basic human flourishing” (40). Again, these different categories of existence are important to draw attention to because they reveal the hierarchy that resides within Nussbaum’s universalism. In the taxonomy whose outlines are barely sketched out here, there is life that merely survives, and life that functions and flourishes. The life that resides in the former category is incomplete and undeveloped, in contrast to the latter that is more “fully” human. These distinctions continue to limn the divide between those who are positioned to right wrongs, and those who are fated to perpetually wrong.

Aware of the criticisms coming from feminism and postcolonial studies, Nussbaum’s staging of the abstract human presents itself as truly inclusive and encompassing of all difference. In contrast to prior iterations that collapse the human with masculinity and the Western subject, the capabilities list claims to have corrected these earlier oversights and to finally have everyone accounted for. In order for the category of the human to become abstract, however, its contours must be fixed and identified. This means that the process of abstraction will always be exclusionary because the category will be specified in particular ways, casting some as more human than others. In assigning a substance to the human, then, the capabilities list carries a coercive and regulatory imperative to consign difference to a “lesser” humanity. By consequence, some are literally rendered expendable: “...we will have to answer the costs we are willing to pay to get all citizens above the threshold, as opposed to leaving a

⁸³ Nussbaum’s framework further assumes that the meaning of the human can be known in advance, and that agreement and unity on this meaning form the basis for politics. Instead of aiming towards definitional closure, as Judith Butler (1990) has argued in relation to the category of “woman,” another possibility is to insist upon the necessary incompleteness of identity. The implications of posing a stable and agreed-upon definition of the human as the grounds for countering violence will be further developed, but for now it is only to note that it necessarily carries a judgment about who is the most human, and reserves equality for those that are included within its terms.

small number below and allowing the rest a considerably above-threshold quality of life” (43). This “small number” exposes the exclusion that serves as the enabling condition of human rights. In defining the human, such an undertaking cannot avoid producing a margin, inhabited by those whose inhumanity buttresses the rights of others. As revealed here, the universalism claimed by human rights still operates according to a logic of measure, articulated as a cost-benefit analysis, that ultimately justifies the exploitation of others and consignment to a life that, failing to count as human, is consonant with death.⁸⁴ What, after all of this, does Nussbaum’s list identify as fundamental to the human? Or to rearticulate its stakes, what agreement on the meaning of the human forms the prerequisite for membership within humanity?

Beginning with “life” defined as the ability to “live to the end of a human life of normal length,” the central human functional capabilities enumerates a series of rights that span categories such as bodily integrity, health, emotions, and play (41). These capabilities are posed as objective criteria to be evaluated from an archimedean perspective, that is, a gaze from nowhere. Knowledge of the particular is irrelevant, for it is assumed that the presence or absence of these capabilities can simply be read off any given set of social relations, place, or more aptly, “culture.” Where they are lacking demands “action” in the form of “policy” from the outside. Therefore, inscribed within this list is an injunction to intervene on behalf of those whose lives do not reflect these fundamental principles. Given its definition of a “truly” human life, such interventions can only come from above, conducted by the people who serve as the referent for liberalism. The various geographic and cultural markers ascribed to liberalism take the place of civilization as the origin and seat of equality, meaning that the adjudication and enforcement of these principles are conducted in a single direction. To that end, the notion of the human articulated in this list bears the traits that have long been the domain of the civilized. Under the heading “Senses, Imagination, Thought” comes to following: “Being able to use the senses; being able to imagine, to think, and to reason—and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education (41).” Item six, titled “Practical Reason,” continues: “Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in a critical reflection about the planning of one’s

⁸⁴ Agamben’s concept of “bare life” references the exception that is the enabling condition of the rights-bearing subject. See *Homo Sacer*.

own life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience) (41).” Although Nussbaum recognizes that reason has been deployed in the service of racial hierarchies and also aligned with masculinity, she proceeds with the understanding that these prior exclusions can be overcome by properly universalizing the concept. The solution, in other words, is to extend rationality to those that have been previously denied its capacity. What this chapter suggests, however, is that the conceptual backdrop of civilization remains firmly in place even when the borders of rationality are expanded. As a result, the concept of reason as it is universalized through the capabilities list continues to be constituted through racial difference. Before going further, it is instructive to recall the figures that anchored Wollstonecraft’s defense of woman’s reason. As we saw there, the ability for woman to appear as equivalent to man under the sign of reason relied upon racialized others to mark the outside of civilization. Hence the woman that is entitled to rights is constituted within the frame of whiteness, Europe, and in difference from what later comes to carry the name of the Orient. In parallel ways, the characteristics of the human outlined in the capabilities list are necessarily redundant for liberal democracies, whose tradition as Nussbaum has made clear, is that of universal respect and equality for all persons. The other whose misguided culture endorses patriarchy, sexism and violence towards women, is consequently produced as irrational and less than human. To state this otherwise, the subject that reason is proper to is the one with an originary claim to liberalism. The referent for liberalism, even as Nussbaum offers it up to become anybody’s tradition, is continually cast as the white race by the terms of the text, now rearticulated as “America,” the West, and “North American culture.” The contours of civilization are thus etched into the subject that stands for the human in human rights.

A central distinction that emerges from Nussbaum’s struggle to avoid the charge of “cultural imperialism” is that of “capability” versus “functioning.” Her universal conception of the human focuses on the former, because as she explains, the goal of politics is to arrange things such that individuals can make their own choices through the exercise of practical reason. To pose functioning as the end of public policy would bypass this crucial element of choice, and impose a conception of the “good life” onto others, a move that is consonant with repression. The enactment of choice thus serves to confirm the capacity for reason, a capacity that is charged with no less than separating the human from the animal: “a good that both suffuses all other functions, making them

human rather than animal, and figures, itself, as a central function on this list (44).” Once the capabilities are in place, then, a person may choose to fast, or practice celibacy. As Nussbaum continues, “we are not pushing individuals into the function: Once the stage is fully set, the choice is up to them” (45). If the difference between starvation and fasting rests upon the category of choice, what assures its presence and makes it recognizable as such? And furthermore, how is it possible to distinguish between the choice to forgo functioning, a choice that both consolidates and undermines the substance of the human, and the absence of the capability altogether? To render legible the exercise of choice, Nussbaum must turn to the other: “what we speak against is the practice of female genital mutilation, which deprives individuals of the opportunity to choose sexual functioning (and indeed, the opportunity to choose celibacy as well)” (44). The oppression of the racialized other, which is made to self-evidently stand for the violation of choice, is therefore called upon to clarify the hazy territory between capability and functioning. Resonating with the conceptual edifice of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, racial difference circulates as the site of pure repression that shores up the autonomy of the civilized self.

Although Nussbaum places the emphasis on the potential (rather than the fulfillment) of functioning as the foundation for a “truly” human life, this tension cannot be sustained. As suggested earlier, what is at stake in holding these apart is proof of the subject’s capacity for choice. The case of those who fast or deny themselves sexual satisfaction provides critical evidence that the conditions for choice are in place. As such, it is the undermining of what is most fundamental to the human that paradoxically provides the confirmation of humanity. Meanwhile, the principle of functioning also occupies a tenuous ground, for it continually slips into the terrain of capability. In her lyrical description of the unique “creature” that is the human being, Nussbaum warns that when deprived of these capabilities, “they are like actors who never get to go on the stage, or a person who sleeps all through life... Their very being makes forward reference to functioning. Thus, if functioning never arrives on the scene they are hardly even what they are” (43). The fulfillment of the human is here latched to functioning, a formulation that unravels the prior instantiation of the one who fasts or practices celibacy as the exemplar of choice, and hence the human. Pushing the distinction between functioning and capability to its limits is instructive in that it exposes the hierarchy of the human that is produced as its effect. Despite the fact that Nussbaum proposes this distinction so as to

avoid imposing a particular kind of life onto others, it still results in constituting some as more properly human than others. Furthermore, the instability that accompanies the emphasis on choice ends up being managed and suppressed through the logic of race. The contradictions that erupt within the self (the white, Western subject) that denies itself the full range of functioning is settled through a turn to the other, whose lack of choice is clear and transparent. The figures of race in Nussbaum's text, like those that occupied the margins of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, have no self and no will to call their own. To use Wendy Brown's phrase, this can be seen as an iteration of the assumption that "we" have culture while culture has "them."⁸⁵ Or more precisely, "we" are ruled by reason, while "they" are ruled by culture.

From the opening pages of *Sex and Social Justice*, a concern with choice serves as the organizing logic for the universalist position advocated by the text. The notion of a self-conscious and willful subject who freely chooses what they think and desire stands as the model for the human, consequently affirming liberalism, with its focus on "putt[ing] people into a position of agency and choice," as the political tradition best suited to undertake this task (11). As we have seen up to this point, the end of policy for Nussbaum is to establish conditions such that people can "pursue flourishing up to their own lights" (9). In that case, the entire apparatus of universal rights depends upon the assurance that choice is the true expression of the self, and therefore autonomous from others, authority or power. The expression of choice also provides confirmation that this self exists, or that there is a proper to the self that can be claimed as one's own. Another way of stating this point is that the possibility of the sovereign subject rests upon the ability to separate choice from coercion, or the true expression of the will from the sway of ideology. Indeed, all of the tenets that form the human capabilities list depend upon the absoluteness of such a distinction. The search for proof of a fully autonomous will has been a recurring struggle in the texts traced throughout this dissertation, and one that upon closer inspection, always deconstitutes itself. From Wollstonecraft to Gilman, the mark of a free will has been produced in difference from figures such as the slave (to take an example from the *Vindication*), whose oppression is represented as complete and totalizing. The specter of this other is thus the enabling condition for the concept of

⁸⁵ Brown (2006) makes this point in her chapter titled "Subjects of Tolerance: Why We Are Civilized and They Are the Barbarians."

choice. In Nussbaum's text, the attempt to locate the sign of a pure autonomy brings choice into crisis.

The entire premise of the universal position, as we have already seen, demands and prescribes consensus, giving way to the following kinds of statements: "...no argument has yet shown that there is any human being who does not desire choice so construed" (11). What, then, becomes of those that appear to abide by other principles, whose lives exceed the desire for individual equality and freedom so defined? The capabilities approach recognizes that "preferences are not always reliable indicators of life quality, as they may be deformed in various ways by oppression and deprivation" (34). The choice of the subject that inhabits the confines of culture therefore cannot be trusted, for what comes to pass as individual preference is revealed to be only the dictates of tradition. Liberated from the clasps of such coercive power, the other will necessarily come to agreement with the self. Difference, then, is the mark of a belated consciousness, a subject who has yet to claim full possession of their autonomy. As Nussbaum continues, "people from groups that have not traditionally had access to education or employment outside the home, may be slow to desire these things because they may not know what they are like or what they could possibly mean in lives like theirs" (11). What distinguishes a preference that expresses the truth of the subject, from a preference that is the effect of power or ideology, is nothing but the familiar contours of civilization, rearticulated as cultural beliefs. The specter of the racial other is recast as a difference affixed to culture, a subject that has yet to attain enlightenment through the exercise of reason. In parallel ways, the imperative of the civilizing mission was precisely to fulfill the desires (likewise, for education and employment) of those that had yet to know such desires were theirs. The autonomous individual whose will can be fully disentangled from influences that come from without, whose consciousness can be isolated from everything that does not originate within the self, is thus ultimately consolidated in opposition to the subject whose preferences are but a repetition of culture.

The constellation of terms that bring meaning to choice, including reason, free will, and the dyad of culture and tradition, also cannot do without the category of "woman." More specifically, the opposition between the subject who exercises choice and the subject who is fated to act as a conduit for "culture," is anchored upon the difference of woman. In the opening pages of the introduction, when Nussbaum is

challenging the notion of monolithic traditions in order to make way for the universality of liberalism, this split in the speaking agent begins to announce itself. There she notes, "...some of these voices would speak differently, too, if they had more information or were less frightened—so part of a culture, too, is what its members *would* say if they were freer or more fully informed...In most parts of the world, that voice is especially likely to be a male voice, and that voice may be not all that attentive to the needs and interests of women" (8). The implicit assumption, of course, is that given freedom and full access to information, every voice will become the mouthpiece of liberal thought. What is deferred into the future through the "*would*," then, is the promise that difference will be rendered intelligible as a repetition of the same. The truth of the cultural other, while inaccessible in the present, is already known in advance; all that remains is for the teleology of progress to play itself out. Here the resonances with the previous arguments for women's rights, which similarly displaced the truth of woman into the future, increasingly come to the fore. But while racial difference is produced as undeveloped life awaiting full autonomy, woman carries an excess that remains open and indeterminate, a meaning that is not yet known. Within the conceptual structure of natural rights, the claim to woman's humanity promises to fix the truth of sexual difference, even as the finality of this truth would bring down the entire architecture of the civilized human. Upon such a shaky terrain hinges the universalizing of human rights.

To return from here to Nussbaum's collapsing of the voice of culture with the male voice, what is to be noted is the work performed by sexual difference. The question provoked by the split in the speaking subject is the following: whose preferences are encoded within and promulgated as "culture?" In other words, who is the agent behind the cultural beliefs that "deform" the capacity for individual choice? If "culture" is responsible for purveying relations of domination, whose "choice" and "will" does it reflect? Sexual difference emerges as crucial for making sense of the opposition between culture and liberalism, for it is the subjugation of women that unifies and differentiates the two. Culture, then, is the product of a masculine other, an other inflected by racial difference, who does not abide by principles of freedom and equality. The subject whose self has been taken over by culture, and who cannot therefore know what it is they "really" want, is constituted as "woman." It is woman who must be emancipated from the influence of culture in order to access her true self, and who in doing so, joins the

collective that coheres around the liberal tradition. Trafficking between culture and the self, “woman” separates and reinforces this opposition. As a result, the subject that is the recipient of human rights is the woman acted upon by “culture,” a subject that is incapable of recognizing what is in their interests, and who therefore requires liberation from the coercive power of their native patriarchy. Within the lines of this text committed to a feminism as humanism, a text that is concerned with achieving a “fully human” life for all, the familiar justification for colonialism can be discerned. If the logic of “white men saving brown women from brown men,” to invoke Spivak’s phrase, is rearticulated in the human capabilities list as the burden (this time) of white humanity, the purpose of tracing this complicity is not to lay the accusation of Western imperialism at Nussbaum’s feet. Rather, it is to grapple with the ways in which the latching of imperial interventions to women’s rights is not merely a misguided appropriation of feminism, but a logic that emerges from within feminism itself.

The model of power that subtends Nussbaum’s account of preferences “deformed...by oppression and deprivation” requires further scrutiny, as it also draws upon the lineage of conceptualizing women’s oppression that has been the focus of this dissertation. At the broadest level, Nussbaum takes for granted that the subject, the person, exists fully formed prior to politics, power, and notably, oppression. Oppression is a force that comes from without and acts upon the subject, rather than constituting the subject as its effect.⁸⁶ This understanding of power conceives of freedom as retrieving the truth of the subject that resides beneath the corruption of society, or more aptly, culture. As we saw in the last chapter, Gilman’s attempt to recover the truth of woman from the deforming influence of an “andro-centric culture,” employed a logic of purity that demanded the eradication of difference. Reaching further back to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Mary Wollstonecraft, the rationale for women’s rights as the fulfillment of truth produced woman, in her current degraded state, as a threat to the civilizational status of (white) society. To recall these arguments suggests that the staging of woman’s truth is always constituted through a domain of exclusion that, in particular, carries the mark of racial difference. In perhaps more subtle ways, this claim to truth continues to serve as end of the political interventions called for by Nussbaum. To begin, the assumption of “deformed” preferences relies upon the opposition between those in command of their

⁸⁶ See Foucault’s discussion of power in *History of Sexuality*.

will, and those whose desires are not their own. As we have seen in Nussbaum's text, this opposition is affixed onto the difference of culture and hence race, which repeats the exclusion that founds the autonomous subject. Because the universalism prescribed by the capabilities list casts difference as the sign of a consciousness that has yet to claim full possession of itself, Nussbaum starts by challenging the tendency within neoclassical economics to take people's desires as given (11). Turning to John Stuart Mill, she cites his assessment of woman's sexuality as the product of subjugation as an alternative to the economic model. The frivolity and self-indulgence of woman, Mill argued, must not be seen as "natural," for it is the result of how men have dictated the organization of the sexes to serve their interests. As in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, the starting premise accepts that women are degraded, and thereby reconsolidates man as the reference point for the human. With Mill's critique as her point of entry, Nussbaum calls for further investigation into the "social origins" of desire, preference and emotion, with passing reference to recent scholarship in "cognitive psychology" and "anthropology" (13). The search for a truth to woman, here in the guise of pinning down the pure meaning of desire, thus retains a continued hold on the argument for women's human rights. Positivist knowledge promises to provide the true origin of these desires, and thus identify with finality the difference between a "free" choice and one that only masquerades as such. But as the distinction between capability and functioning has already demonstrated, such an undertaking will only lead to an unraveling of "free will" at its very foundation, collapsing along with it the concept of the human that organizes human rights.

Universalizing "Woman"

Taking a step back, the human capabilities approach theorized by Nussbaum draws upon the lineage of liberal feminism in its attempt to insert "woman" into the category of the "human." This undertaking both consolidates the contours of "woman," at the same time that it seeks to make sexual difference irrelevant. That there is a specificity to "woman" is thus the condition of possibility for the claim to women's human rights, and yet, this difference always threatens the self-identical enclosure of the human. The previous chapters have each focused on an iteration of the appeal to

women's humanity to demonstrate that the staging of woman as an abstract category requires a passage through racial difference. As a result, the subject of women's rights is not only marked as specifically "civilized," but produces a racial hierarchy that, when brought to its end, calls for the elimination of the other. Nussbaum's contribution to conceptualizing women as "fully human" starts from the premise that sexual difference belongs within the same field as rank, caste and birth, as characteristics that liberal thought deems to be "morally irrelevant" (10). Harkening back to Wollstonecraft's framing, Nussbaum bases the claim to equality on the notion that all humans are capable of "choice and reasoning" (10). The inclusion of woman is therefore derived from reason, and rests upon the assertion of sameness to man. Although Nussbaum's universalism presents itself as truly inclusionary, in contrast to the racist ways in which the human has been previously qualified, this chapter suggests that her staging of women's rights unwittingly inherits and reproduces the racialized exclusions that animate the *Vindication*. To recall the argument from the first chapter, the equivalence of woman to man under the sign of reason is achieved through the broader frame of civilization. By consequence, the redemption of woman as a rational subject relies upon the foreclosure of figures such as the Muslim woman, the Turkish woman, and the female slave from the domain of the (civilized) human. The concept of civilization has now dropped out of Nussbaum's text, but only to be rearticulated as "culture" accompanied by its respective traditions. As such, the figures bereft of choice and therefore reason that anchor Nussbaum's platform are the condition of possibility for its consolidation of "woman." Once again, the subject of women's rights is demarcated and circumscribed through race. This next section seeks to draw out the ethnocentrism of abstract "woman" that retains a lingering hold on the universalizing of women's human rights.

Unlike the previous articulations of women's rights, Nussbaum does not consign difference to a state of abjection, which is a mode of exclusion that militantly seals off the self and demands the eradication of the other. This form of racism is one that bears the recognizable traits of eugenics, in that it seeks to purify the collective from the contamination of difference. In contrast to the explicit racism and xenophobia that inflected Stanton and Gilman's rhetoric, positing "the [white] race" as under threat and in need of protection, Nussbaum articulates a humanitarianism that is all-encompassing in each reach. The violence of this political stance is consequently far more frightening

precisely because it takes place through inclusion. Whereas it was clear in the case of these other feminists where the borders of equality lay, and who was considered capable of democracy, these limits have now been extended to all of humanity. Disentangling how the “human” and now “woman” is constituted within the platform of human rights contributes to uncovering the ways in which the ideology of equality justifies racism and subordination. More precisely, equality is only granted to those who are recognized as the same, and hence it is for this reason that racial and sexual hierarchies have always been compatible with the commitment to democracy. Although scholars of liberalism such as Martha Nussbaum understand the barring of women from full citizenship as a contradiction that was bound to fail, such an exclusion is in fact entirely coherent with the terms of the liberal individual. To invoke a feminist thinker influential for Nussbaum, Catherine MacKinnon has argued that equality as sameness is a gendered formulation of equality, in that women uniquely carry the mark of sexual difference. Within the terms of liberal egalitarianism, there is a problem when those considered the same are treated differently, but it cannot recognize difference in the first place. For this reason, women can never be equal to men.⁸⁷ How, then, is “woman” figured within Nussbaum’s argument for universal equality? What is posed as the underlying unity of this category, the ground that binds women together? And who is rendered into the same within the matrix of this universalism?

The claim for women’s human rights is founded upon the universalizing of “woman” as a category that is capable of housing differences of race, class and sexuality (to name but a few). To that end, the “woman” that is the subject of human rights is posited as the achievement of full and total inclusion, and the collectivity of “women” one to which every of its members can lay equal claim. However, as this study has worked to trace, the substance of abstract woman is always given a specific inflection, for the very premise of membership carries the prescription for regulatory policing. The argument for global sisterhood popularized by Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood is Global* provides an instructive point of departure for considering the ways in which the category of “woman” is delimited within the human capabilities model. Morgan’s expansive

⁸⁷ See MacKinnon (1987). Wendy Brown (2000) draws upon MacKinnon’s formulation to expose the male dominance that is at the heart of liberalism in her piece titled “Suffering Rights as Paradoxes.” Of course, the problem with this formulation is that it only extends difference to gender, and posits the relation between the masculinity and femininity as a closed field of meaning.

anthology surveys women's condition around the world to argue for the solidarity that results from a common experience of oppression, culminating in her characterization of women as a "colonized people" (31). Registering anxiety about colonial modes of representation and the violence of "Western ethnocentrism," Morgan resolves these dilemmas through an assertion of equivalence. To condemn "female genital excision" thus becomes acceptable when it is likened to "gratuitous hysterectomies or mastectomies or cesarean sections" (xxi). Mohanty's seminal critique in "Under Western Eyes" calls attention to the production of "Third World difference" that accompanies the consolidation of woman as a universal subject of oppression, and thereby offers crucial insights for thinking through the limits of Morgan's conceptual frame. In Mohanty's terms, the assumption of "woman" as a coherent category that preexists social relations ends up producing a split between First World and Third World women, where the former emerge as the true (because liberated) agents of feminism. More specifically, this split occurs because women's oppression is taken for granted as a fact that merely requires elucidation within specific geographical and historical (although "cultural" is perhaps more appropriate) contexts. As a result, institutions and structures of power are seen to variously act upon "women," creating the conditions for establishing a metric of "more" and "less" oppressed. To diverge a bit from Mohanty here, the consolidation of "woman" that is the organizing crux of Morgan's universal theory of patriarchy is achieved through a displacement of difference, constituting this subject under the sign of whiteness. This is particularly evident in the formulation of women as a "colonized people," the coherence of which relies upon the difference between these terms and the absence of the colonized woman, thereby insipidly latching woman to the race of the colonizer. By consequence, the positing of an underlying ground or unity to the category "woman" brings with it a particular account of gender/sexual oppression.⁸⁸ Moreover, the meaning of oppression is networked through other concepts such as equality and liberation, all of which determine what gets recognized as an instance of women's subordination. What this suggests is that the very premise of women's subordination has a particular "woman" as its referent, as well as a grid of intelligibility for determining what repression and liberation look like. And given that the framework of rights is built upon an absolute distinction between the

⁸⁸ Within the frame of liberal feminism, the symptomatic examples of women's issues include sexual violence, reproductive rights, economic autonomy.

two, the entire apparatus of global sisterhood is held together by the ability to designate some women as more oppressed than others.

Even as global sisterhood posits a unified experience as the ground of “woman,” then, this conceptual frame continually distinguishes between fundamentally different kinds of violence. Mapping onto the boundaries of civilization, the violence of the self is produced as not only less repressive, but as having different effects upon the sovereignty of the subject. In the case of Nussbaum’s text, the violence of the other reflects their essential inability to recognize the autonomy of the individual. The cases of women’s oppression that occur outside the contours of liberalism violate the humanity of its victims, acting as confirmation that the racial (other) is marked by an inherent difference. This is the logic of blood recast as cultural tradition, “customs and political arrangements” (32). The necessity to look past the ethical dilemma of imperialism and assert the universalism of human rights is ultimately reaffirmed by the simple fact that others do not conceptualize the human in the same way, and thus cannot but commit an inhuman violence. Once again, the account of woman’s condition works to solidify the outlines of the human, and designate the proper agent of redemption. Nussbaum is clear in this regard: “without some notion of the basic worth of human capacities, we have a hard time arguing for women’s equality and for basic human rights...their current status in many parts of the world is not a fully human one” (43). Underlying such a statement is the part that serves as the remainder, the part that is the reference point for what it means to treat women as “fully human.” The violence of these “many parts of the world” that circulate as the justification for universalizing liberal thought are later given more concrete form. In particular, Nussbaum dedicates separate chapters to religion and “the case of genital mutilation.” Within this iteration of women’s rights, the figures that violate the freedom of choice occupy the earlier position of the savage, whose difference is constitutively bound to the teleology of civilizational progress. Although the notion of progress has clearly become an unsavory term, Nussbaum’s case for women’s human rights reiterates the burden of the civilized to develop the “inferior” race.

The opposition that Nussbaum sets up between liberalism and “religious and traditional views of life” is straight-forward and absolute: the latter, according to her, do not hold “freedom of choice [as] a central ethical goal” (70). In its concern for the “agency of individual group members” over what is good for the group as a whole,

liberalism sets itself in contrast to feudalism and monarchy, as well as “the caste system characteristic of traditional Indian society” (57).⁸⁹ The other belongs in the same category as an earlier moment in the history of man, replicating and reiterating the logic of progress. Nussbaum’s discussion of religion charges Islam, along with difference inscribed with the geographical markers of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, as contradicting basic human rights. Even as the text attempts to keep “religion,” “culture,” and “tradition” distinct, they continually slide and collapse into another, leading to statements such as the following: “Although it is difficult to distinguish between a religion and the cultural traditions that surround it, the Hindu, Islamic, and Confucian traditions have all, with some plausibility, been accused of denigrating the value of female life...(88).” This collapsing occurs because these terms stand for nothing else but race and its logic of blood, designating a difference whose essential nature it is to repress women. The category of religion is therefore called upon to separate humanity into those who “accept [the] equal dignity and liberty of persons,” and those whose condition it is to view sexual difference as inequality (85). In the case of Wollstonecraft’s treatise, the displacement of patriarchy onto the domain of racial difference allows for the redemption of the civilized self. The *Vindication* poses the degraded state of woman as the threat of becoming like the other, thereby reconsolidating equality as the proper condition of the self. The anxiety about the status of the self and its claim to civilization that coursed throughout the works of Wollstonecraft, Stanton, and Gilman, has altogether disappeared in the Nussbaum’s articulation of women’s human rights. The remaining traces of misogyny and sexism within liberal orders are merely anachronisms that have yet to work themselves out, for the status of the US as the pinnacle and measure for women’s rights is otherwise unquestioned. Now the burden is articulated otherwise—as that of the civilized to correct the wrongs of “culture.”

In her analysis of the discourse of tolerance, Wendy Brown (2006) lays out the ways in which liberalism gets associated with individuality, tolerance and civilization, on the one hand, and group identity gets linked with fundamentalism, barbarism and the intolerable on the other. Drawing on Freud’s understanding of the dangers of group identity, she explains how liberalism presents itself as the sole political system that

⁸⁹ The privileging of the individual over the collective does not bear out for this itinerary of feminism, in which the argument for women’s rights has consistently been made for the good of society.

secures freedom and equality for the individual. By default, any system that infringes upon the individual is seen to be barbaric, with the implication that violence against it is justified in the name of freedom. According to Brown, the same logic which led Freud to the suggestion that the individual loses their reason, moral conscience and control of their impulses in a group setting is replicated here. Liberalism conceptualizes “culture”-- which for Brown includes attachments to a God, a belief system, or a people--as a threat to civilization and the rational, self-regulating subject if it is made public. As a result, the autonomous individual that is free from such ties becomes the symbol of civilization and the achievement of freedom. Brown concludes that this model of group identity represents nonliberal places as prone to violence, leading to the consolidation of liberalism as the only political form that can put this violence in check. Brown’s argument has a series of implications for Nussbaum’s conceptualization of the violence experienced by women. In her chapter titled “Judging Other Cultures: the Case of Genital Mutilation,” Nussbaum establishes a taxonomy of violence that maps onto this distinction between the civilized and the barbaric. Put briefly, she argues that the “practice of female genital mutilation,” to use her terminology,⁹⁰ constitutes a violation of women’s human rights that demands an intervention. To those who have labeled criticism of “genital mutilation” as ethnocentric, Nussbaum responds: “The fact that a needy human being happens to live in Togo rather than Idaho does not make her less my fellow, less deserving of moral commitment. And to fail to recognize the plight of a fellow human being because we are busy moving our own culture to greater moral heights seems the very height of moral obtuseness and parochialism” (122). The refusal to engage in relativism and the challenge of dismantling an understanding of responsibility to others that stops at the borders of the nation can be claimed, in many ways, as the very project of the humanities. The question, however, is not whether the plight of the other deserves recognition, but rather how this plight is understood, conceptualized, and recognized. Furthermore, what is the fellowship that binds humanity together, the basis of which demands and calls forth a “moral commitment?” In a long footnote on Martha Nussbaum’s work, Spivak (2006) characterizes the imperative to

⁹⁰ The rest of the chapter will continue to put this phrase in quotes to mark the judgment that is necessarily carried within it. A body of feminist scholarship discusses the advantages and drawbacks of terms such as “excision” and “cutting.”

acknowledge the equal humanity of others in the following way: as a bringing of the other into the self, rather than a risky othering of the self (267). The former, as Nussbaum's engagement with "female genital mutilation" demonstrates, is perfectly compatible with the separation of humanity into the civilized and the barbaric. More importantly, the justification for violence that accompanies this frame is carried within a commitment to humanitarianism, and women's human rights more specifically. In that regard, the shocking endorsement of subordination on the part of Stanton or Gilman is perhaps less dangerous exactly because it announces itself directly.

The case of "female genital mutilation" receives such extensive treatment in Nussbaum's text because it is ultimately necessary for holding together the coherence of choice. The chaos of meaning that erupts in the attempt to establish a choice as one's own, as the unmediated truth of the self, is adjudicated through the violence committed by "culture." In this way, the entire conceptual edifice of women's human rights can be said to rest upon the specter of the African woman, whose choice is violated at a precise, identifiable and incontestable moment. As we already saw, early in the articulation of the central human capabilities Nussbaum invokes this example to pin down the distinction between "capability" and "functioning." There she specifies that the goal of her platform is to put in place the conditions for "normal" sexual satisfaction. An individual may then choose a life of celibacy, a choice that is contrasted to the practice of "female genital mutilation, which deprives individuals of the opportunity to choose sexual functioning" altogether (44). To be clear, this is not to suggest that the distinction between the two should be lost, or their difference relativized. The argument that this chapter aims to make has to do with the ways in which the autonomous subject is constitutively bound to a difference that lacks individuality and will. The barbaric violence practiced by the racial other, a violence that is held up as an instance of absolute repression, is absolutely inextricable from the meaning of autonomy. Gone are the hazy areas that surround celibacy and fasting (to invoke the earlier examples), for this violence unmistakably violates its victims, and constitutes an act of "culture." Resonating with the frame of civilization, this representation inherits and insidiously repeats the defining features of the savage. The following account of the moment of violation is therefore not just narrative detail in Nussbaum's text, but absolutely crucial to the consolidation of the liberal individual: "...during FGM small girls, frequently as young as four or five, are

held down by force, often, as in Togo, by a group of adult women, and have no chance to select an alternative” (123). What is at stake here is the intelligibility of choice, and the notion of the individual who freely selects and makes decision in line with their will.

Nussbaum’s case for “judging other cultures,” as the title of her chapter advocates, is built upon her opposition to the cultural relativist proclivity to flatten and equalize all forms of violence under the mantra that criticism of another culture is akin to ethnocentric imperialism. Responding to scholarship that calls for attention to the oppressive practices within “American culture,” including its own disciplining and regulatory conceptions of female beauty, she deploys the concept of “choice” to establish clear lines of difference between “our own culture” and the practice of “female genital mutilation.” She enumerates the differences such: “Female genital mutilation is carried out by force, whereas dieting in response to culturally constructed images of beauty is a matter of choice, however seductive the persuasion. Few mothers restrict their children’s dietary intake to unhealthy levels in order to make them slim; indeed most mothers of anorexic girls are deeply grieved by their daughters’ condition” (123). She next invokes the mothers of Togo, who act as the agents of male domination, and are the direct hand that inflicts violence upon their children. In the domain of race, there is no space granted to sexual difference, for all that appears is an undifferentiated and totalizing patriarchy. “Their” mothers are conduits for “culture” and hence support and enforce female subordination, while “our” mothers recognize and “are deeply grieved” by the effects of normative ideals of beauty. The contrast can thus be put as the following: the savage (bearing the mark of “Togo”) inflicts a violence without regard for human life, and in so doing, reveals that they are entirely governed by culture. The self that resides within the bounds of “American culture,” struggles with a progressive form of patriarchy that does not infringe upon choice, and thus still respects the integrity of the individual. Furthermore, women in America have a consciousness and a will to call their own, untouched by ideology, that allows for the possibility of resistance. The replacement of civilization with the notion of bounded, and discrete cultures reinstates the (racial) tie that binds a collectivity to particular behaviors, predispositions and beliefs, making way for the recuperation of the American woman as the embodiment of the autonomous subject.

Even within the course of this example, the possibility of locating female autonomy with any authority appears ever more tenuous. The discussion of how

standards of feminine beauty play out in the American context leads Nussbaum to reflect: “the choices involved in dieting are often not fully autonomous: They may be the product of misinformation and strong social forces that put pressure on women to make choice, sometimes dangerous ones, that they would not make otherwise...And yet, the distinction between social pressure and physical force should also remain salient, both morally and legally” (123). In this hierarchy of violence, what demands an intervention is the physical display of force, actions that leave their visible and tangible traces upon the body. The modes of power that operate through consent, or in other words, forms of subordination that circulate through hegemony, are not seen to be as threatening to individual autonomy. But, as the tensions contained within this passage demonstrate, perhaps it is precisely in the absence of a physical sign that the notion of “free choice” becomes the most difficult to hold onto, and to identify with certainty. The further Nussbaum explores the example of dieting, the further oppositions such as that between starvation and fasting, critical to the structure of the human capabilities list, begin to unravel. Following this confusing digression, Nussbaum adds a parenthetical note about the similarly difficult task of separating seduction from rape, a line that, as she puts it, relies upon the “elusive distinction” between a threat and an offer (123). In many ways, this example has to be contained and put to the side in the mode of the parenthesis, because rape carries the violence of physical force, thereby confounding the absolute difference between the self and the other. Nussbaum resolves these conflicts by stating: “nonetheless, we should make the distinction as best we can, and recognize that there remain relevant differences between female genital mutilation and dieting, as usually practiced in America” (123). The consolidation of the “we” in this sentence, the “we” that is the dispenser of rights and that makes decisions about who is wronged, reasserts the civilizational burden of human rights. The difference that marks dieting in America, a difference that can only be that of civilization given that nothing else stands, secures the American woman as the bearer of universal rights and the one best suited to correct the transgressions of the unfit.

Contending with Liberalism’s Sexism

The feminist political scientist Susan Okin drew many of the same conclusions

about liberalism's relationship to sexism in her provocatively titled article, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" Inciting a huge range of responses at the time of its publication in the late nineties, Okin posed the following question: "what should be done when the claims of minority cultures or religions clash with the norm of gender equality that is at least formally endorsed by liberal states (however much they continue to violate it in their practices)" (9)? Given the resonances between Nussbaum and Okin's arguments, an examination of the critical challenges to the latter's rejection of multiculturalism provides the opening for articulating what this itinerary of liberal feminism has contributed to the discussion. By way of conclusion, this section will end by considering Wendy Brown's reading of Okin, and the questions that this dissertation provokes in response. In her seminal essay, Okin argues that the tolerance and respect for difference advocated by multiculturalism stands in contradiction to cultural practices that are oppressive towards women. Multiculturalism's support of "group rights" can therefore also function as an endorsement of women's subordination. If liberalism's commitment to individual autonomy and freedom are upheld as universal principles, Okin concludes, then those that violate women's rights are not to be tolerated. Like Nussbaum, Okin identifies "minority cultures and religions" as the origin and cause of sexism. As a result, her argument is also beholden to an implicit logic of race that identifies "a people" whose nature it is to marginalize and devalue women. The organizing crux of Okin's argument is therefore the familiar opposition between liberalism and "culture," an opposition that already displays signs of buckling in the opening question. Because the basis for universalizing liberalism relies upon its recognition of women's equality, and the belief that the notion of woman's humanity is inscribed within the very foundations of its principles, the existence of sexism within its borders is fundamentally destabilizing. The parenthesis is once more called upon to do the work of holding aside this tension, a disjuncture that is here articulated as one between "formal endorsement" and "practice," that threatens to undo liberalism's claim to the universal. The violation of women's humanity that occurs inside the domain of civilization, beginning with Wollstonecraft's treatise, has always been managed as the sign of a difference within, such that patriarchy is displaced onto racial difference and cast as the proper condition of the other. This same mechanism is repeated in both Nussbaum and Okin's defense of women's rights. In particular, Okin's rejection of

multiculturalism reveals an anxiety that the other renders liberalism illiberal, an anxiety that is the rearticulation of racial difference threatening civilizational progress. This position can only end up prescribing the eradication of difference, placed under the name of “culture,” that stands as an obstacle to the fulfillment of woman’s humanity. The suppression of difference that occurs under the guise of universalizing liberal equality does not take place without first producing a hierarchy of relative “fitness.” The “barbaric law” in Peru that exonerates the rapist if they marry the victim is outdone by that of “Pakistan and the Arab Middle East,” which “condones the killing or pressuring into suicide of the raped woman” (16). As this study has traced, the argument for women’s rights carries within it a logic measure that ranks and orders difference according to relative levels of humanity. Given that “culture” is consonant with patriarchy in Okin’s framework, the solution can only be the following: “...they *might* be much better off if the culture into which they were born were... to become extinct” (22). This call for the extinction of racial difference recast as “culture” cannot be compartmentalized as Okin’s own, for such an imperative has now been revealed to be constitutively bound up with the argument for women’s rights. The eugenic drive to eliminate the inferior and purify “the race” finds new form in Okin’s opposition to multiculturalism.

Wendy Brown engages with Okin’s essay from the vantage point of her critical inquiry into the concept of tolerance.⁹¹ Brown’s broader project in her book is to trace the relations of power implicit within this dominant mode of handling difference, beginning with the premise that tolerance is conferred by the dominant onto the marginal. Those who require tolerance are marked as inferior and aberrant, while the one who tolerates is consolidated as the superior and universal subject. Significantly, Brown suggests that tolerance only extends to the limits of civilization, meaning that violence is justified towards those that do not abide by liberal rules and principles. Actions that violate the respect for sovereignty, autonomy and freedom, precisely those principles which distinguish the self from the other, are rationalized when directed towards those who do not practice tolerance. When dealing with the uncivilized, then, it is both legitimate and necessary to suspend liberal values.⁹² In bringing this framework to bear upon Okin’s

⁹¹ See her chapter titled “Tolerance as In/Civilizational Discourse” in *Regulating Aversion*.

⁹² Derrida (2005) refers to the autoimmunity of democracy in making a related point. As he puts it, democracy sometimes has to be suspended, and thereby undermine itself, in order to save itself. Derrida’s example is the suspension of the electoral process in Algeria in 1992 when the Islamic Salvation Front

argument, Brown also draws attention to the ways in which “culture” is made to stand in as the source and perpetrator of sexism, thereby evacuating politics from the picture. For Brown, the positing of liberalism as the solution to women’s inequality relies upon universalizing its principles, with the related assumption that that they are free from cultural or religious authority. In her words, liberalism is assumed to be “cultureless,” and therefore Okin does not recognize that its central categories are themselves gendered and premised upon a white, masculine subject. Furthermore, the “freedom” of the liberal subject relies upon the idea that culture and religion have been relegated and contained within the private, allowing the individual to appear unfettered by the ties of ideology within the public. The distinction between the public and the private therefore produces the nonliberal other as ruled by culture, in contrast to the liberal subject that “chooses” culture and is ruled by the Law. While Brown offers productive insights into the ways in which the autonomy of the liberal individual is circuted through a difference that lacks individuality and will, her critique of Okin continues to rest upon the category of “culture.” As a result, she inevitably ends up responding on the same terms that Okin takes for granted. In a relativizing move, Brown corrects Okin’s understanding of liberalism as “culture-less” by endowing it with culture. It is not just the other that has culture, then, for the self is also ruled and regulated by it. If, as this study suggests, the category of “culture” emerges as a replacement for the logic of race, inheriting and reconsolidating the contours of civilization as a result, then it cannot be enough to expand its boundaries once more. The question that remains, then, is what is “culture” made to stand for in Brown’s critique? Who, in other words, is “the people” behind liberalism’s “culture?” How are its lines of inclusion and exclusion drawn in this instance?

In addition to these points, Brown works to challenge the forms of gendered power and subordination that remain hidden from view in Okin’s analysis. Specifically, she suggests that Okin only recognizes legal expressions of sexism and therefore fails to engage with forms of power that exceed the domain of the law. In addition to further consolidating the law as free of particular “cultural” values and beliefs, this model of women’s oppression leads to an ordering of violence that classifies the sexism of the other as barbaric while redeeming the sexism of the self as civilized. To challenge Okin’s

threatened to take over. Democracy is thus a threat to itself, and requires the intervention of sovereignty so that it can be preserved. Put otherwise, democracy has to be violated in order to be saved.

myopic view of power and the idea that “other cultures” are more oppressive to women, Brown points to the ways in which women’s bodies are disciplined and regulated within “the West” and the repercussions for not conforming to normative definitions of femininity. The examples that she draws out focus on the alterations women make to their bodies in conjunction with these norms, including body modifications, plastic surgeries and dieting. Brown’s aim is to suggest that the different modes of power enacted by the state or the law, that circulate within commodity culture, and that proliferate through the market, cannot be subject to measure and ranked accordingly. Indeed, the injunction to order women’s oppression along a linear spectrum (underwritten by progress) is what allows for the definition of some women as more liberated and therefore best positioned to spread rights to others. Again, while this comparative model appears to intervene and break with Okin’s frame, it may continue to be tethered to some of its founding presuppositions. For instance, what Brown identifies as “Western” forms of gender oppression carries its own privileging of an untouched, pure and unaltered body as the sign of liberation. Implicit within her critique is the notion that rejecting standards of ideal femininity, and any pressure to conform with regulatory aesthetics of beauty, constitutes a challenge to hegemonic power. This, on its own terms, is not a very complex understanding of power, and more importantly, it still remains bound to the opposition between freedom and repression. Elsewhere throughout her work, Wendy Brown has diligently worked to complicate the notion of a “free” subject that resides beneath the operations of power, gender, and politics. However, the attempt to counter representations of the barbaric other by exposing the barbaric nature of the self, quite simply, keeps the category of the barbaric intact, along with the civilized, autonomous subject that accompanies it.

Lastly, it is useful to recall that Robin Morgan, in articulating the foundations for global sisterhood, refused to see “female genital mutilation” as different from hysterectomies or mastectomies. This equalizing gesture presumably allowed her to condemn the first form of violence without appearing ethnocentrist. Despite Morgan’s intentions, the recognition of sexism everywhere, as has been clearly established, did not ultimately preclude the consolidation of Western women as the agents of feminism. Nussbaum and Okin, by contrast, are unabashed in their evaluation of “female genital mutilation” as a violation of individual choice and autonomy, and as therefore objectively

worse than dieting.⁹³ In response to the latter, Wendy Brown points out the sexism operative within liberalism, emphasizing the violence of disciplinary forms of powers which lead subjects to regulate and police themselves, as in (yet again) the case of dieting. Despite the variations between these positions, what can be said to be the underlying ground they all share? In other words, while they may seem to disagree on the meaning of women's oppression, and the relative violence of the self and the other, what is the shared terrain on which this back and forth takes place? What is the conceptual framework of women's oppression that they all inhabit? To offer an approach to these questions that, in many ways, have been at the heart of this dissertation, the very appearance of "female genital mutilation" and dieting across these positions depends upon a comparison between instances of women's oppression. A comparison is premised upon an underlying unity between the terms in question, or the assumption that they belong within the same category of meaning and therefore share the same ground. Put otherwise, a comparison asserts the terms it brings together as repetitions of the same. Given this, what is the sameness that grounds these examples, and that provides the background frame within which Morgan, Okin, Nussbaum and Brown can then disagree? As this chapter has argued, this debate relies upon the unity of the category "woman," and the representation of woman's condition that follows from it. In other words, these conflicting and varying accounts of women's oppression work to render the category of "woman" legible, and along with it the difference between freedom and repression. The narration of woman's condition, whatever precise form and inflection it may take, produces and consolidates the notion of a liberated subject as its effect. Moreover, at stake here are also the relations of difference that lend coherence to the self. Across these texts, the concept of culture, along with the presumed viability of an entity named the "West," is absolutely integral to the argument concerning women's oppression that it posits. From different vantage points and towards different ends, Brown and Nussbaum outwardly set out to dismantle the boundaries circumscribing the identity of the West. At the same time, however, their respective arguments concerning the relationship between

⁹³ Nussbaum says this directly: "These differences [enumerated in an eight point list] help explain why there is no serious campaign to make ads for diet programs, or the pictures of emaciated women in *Vogue* illegal, whereas FGM is illegal in most countries where it occurs. Such laws are not well enforced... These differences also explain why Fauziya Kassindja was able to win political asylum. We shall not see similar arguments for political asylum for American women who have been pressured by the culture to be thin... (124)."

sexism and liberalism cannot do without it. Grappling with the shared terrain of meaning between these thinkers should not lose sight of the contrasts between the ways in which they each conceive of the subject, power or liberalism, more broadly. And yet, there may be an understanding of woman and her oppression, an understanding that is bound to a hierarchy of civilizational difference, that continues to be smuggled into even those efforts to expose the foundational sexism inscribed within liberalism's structure.

At the beginning of this study, Wollstonecraft's appeal for the recognition of women's full rationality relied upon the spectacle of women's oppression outside the contours of civilization, a violence that took footbinding and the subordination of Islam as its symptomatic examples. This same text, it should now be recalled, expressed a commitment to recognizing an underlying commonality across women's experience, even as it so rigidly demarcated the savage from the civilized. The culminating chapter of this study has worked to suggest that the contours of this conceptual edifice, one whose defining feature is the latching of women's rights to civilizational progress, is carried through into the argument for women's human rights, of which Nussbaum's take is but one iteration. That the argument for a fully inclusionary "feminism as humanism" draws upon the very same specter of racialized patriarchy provides the traces of this legacy. The following statements found within the pages of *Sex and Social Justice* can now be understood as constitutively bound to the claim for "women's rights as human rights:" "under traditional Islamic law, women are explicitly unequal" (97); "in contemporary Iran, the penalty for women who do not adhere to the dress code is between thirty-four and seventy-four lashes with a whip" (83); "whereas the prospect of footbinding of the traditional Chinese type... would, in my view, give grounds for political asylum; the presence of high-heeled shoes surely would not, however any problems may be associated with the fashion" (125); "in India, women's purity is traditionally guaranteed by seclusion" (125). Contending with the lineage of women's rights that has come to occupy the global stage, as this dissertation argues, demands the continued work of ushering out the figure of the savage that provides the enabling ground for woman's insertion into the category of the "human."

Conclusion: Thinking a Feminism From the Margins

This engagement with the constitutive exclusions of the category “woman” grapples with a set of questions that are not new, but on the contrary, are constantly posed and struggled over within the discipline of women’s studies. Indeed, the recent renaming of departments from “women” to “gender” and/or “sexuality” studies signals an attempt to displace the object of study away from “women” in testament to the tensions that have continuously plagued it. To return to “woman,” then, appears in many ways at odds with the current scholarship in the field, much of which no longer takes gender as its central category of analysis. And yet, it is not the case that “woman” has been done away with. Far from this, “woman” is carried within feminism as its ordering category, one that indexes the unequal relations of power and conditions of subjugation that are the source of its particular contribution. Although crudely put, the coherency of what is given the name “feminism” is latched to the concept of women’s subordination. In this sense, the justification for feminism rests upon the difference of “woman.” This is not to say that feminism has a uniform or monolithic meaning, or to lose sight of how that meaning is constantly posed and rearticulated anew. Nor does it suggest that the referent for feminism cannot change, or be attached to struggles that perhaps having nothing at all to do with women’s rights. Indeed, if the opening to transform feminism didn’t exist, there would be no use in contending with its colonial and racial logics, its conditions of possibility. At a basic level, then, the motivation for this project resides in the hope for other articulations and imaginations of “woman;” otherwise it would only be a matter of calling for an end to feminism and its relegation alongside the ranks of other indelibly flawed ideologies. Despite the complicities that emerge from this work, not the least of which implicates the claim to women’s humanity with a necessary racism, my purpose has not been to denounce feminism altogether. Instead, it is to call for continued attention to the circulation of “woman” and the relationship between sexual and racial difference that enables its consolidation. For if it is the case that a particular thinking of “woman” is bound up with the conceptual structure of colonial difference, along with the purifying drive to eradicate difference that animates nationalism and its accomplice eugenics, then it is all the more urgent that such a “woman” is not inadvertently smuggled into efforts to build global and transnational feminist coalitions.

The task now turns to thinking a feminism that engages “woman” differently, with the understanding that liberal feminism cannot easily be shed away or put to the side in doing so. I add this last qualifier, which in many ways is how I understand the contribution of this study, for several reasons. First, as the last chapter in particular sought to demonstrate, the rubric of women’s rights continues to circulate as the political face of feminism. Even though disciplinary women’s studies critiques the thinking of rights as the achievement or end of feminism, then, attention to gender and the relations of power that surround it are largely equated to juridical rights on the global stage. To that end, what is understood by “women’s issues” in the realm of global institutions and the accompanying international civil society is dictated by violence that can be recognized and redressed through rights claims, and in particular, rights adjudicated to the subject “women.” Furthermore, the meanings related to women’s oppression, including the conceptualization of the “problem” and its “solution,” are deeply indebted to the lineage of liberal feminism traced here. If reproductive rights but not the construction of dams is seen to fall within the domain of women’s human rights, then, this has much to do with the lasting hold exerted by this specific liberal strain of feminism.

The second point is one that I put forth more as a question, coming to it after having traced a consistent pattern to the ways in which “woman” is constituted and consolidated in this particular line of thought. As many have now suggested, “woman” is not a difference that precedes her naming in language, and in that sense, she is continually posed, articulated and repeated in an effort to lend stability to her meaning. Put otherwise, there is no underlying ground to “woman,” and thus the attempt to fix her content definitively, once and for all, always fails; the constellation of terms that are marshaled to hold her in place continually unravels. The counterpoint to this, however, is that “woman” is also called upon to stabilize other concepts, and the notion of her irreducible difference is crucial to bringing order to the chaos of meaning that inevitably erupts around the sovereign subject. The preceding chapters have thus also followed how the difference of “woman” secures the idea that there is a proper to the self that escapes the reach of power, a fiction that anchors the framework of natural rights and its promise of freedom. While the particular pathway cut by this dissertation focuses on the ways in which “woman” is constituted through the coupling of race and civilization, it is as much

the case that the coherence of the latter terms rely upon sexual difference. Attending to how “woman,” for example, provides the conceptual moorings for the figure of the savage or the native is a project that, although not fully pursued here, is important for displacing feminism as the unique perpetrator of racial hierarchies. If “woman” is invested with meaning not only in terms of an opposition to man, but through relationships with concepts that include reason, equality, freedom, and humanity, then it can be said that the difference of race subtends this constellation. Again, this does not shut down the possibility that “woman” may be constituted through altogether different terms, but it does suggest that racial difference accompanies sexual difference when these concepts emerge from within the liberal episteme. The question that I arrive at in the end is thus whether the consolidation of “woman” as a modern subject can exist without the accompanying notion of a humanity delimited through race.

In the discussions concerning the ethnocentrism of “woman,” the dominant framing of the problem contends that the intelligibility of the category hinges upon the evacuation of difference. Examples of this approach are given throughout the dissertation, where the language employed circles around “woman” being emptied and purified of race. My concern is that the ways in which we talk about and describe feminism’s complicity with racism in the discipline stays within the framework of inclusion and exclusion, and thus holds onto the recognition of difference as the implicit solution. More specifically, the response to the problematic of “woman” has been to think of race and gender (along with other differences) as articulated categories that mutually constitute one another. What is left out of this approach, however, is precisely the ways in which these categories are not parallel or analogous, nor do they interact within the same field of representation. Conceptualizing “woman” as intersected by difference, in other words, does not engage the ways in which this category cannot cohere without the figures that serve as signposts for the human and are themselves expelled from its domain. Put simply, within the conceptual architecture of liberalism, the recognition of woman as human rests upon the savage being less than human. Upon the conclusion of this study, then, this is what I have come to understand by Spivak’s remark about the discontinuous lineages of sexual and racial difference. And thus, the challenge presents itself to decouple feminism from abstract woman, which although such a category may always be necessary, it ultimately cannot be extricated from the

ethnocentrism that allows the foundations of eugenic doctrine to be carried forth into human rights in the guise of equality and justice for the other.

A feminism that comes from the margins must therefore seek to displace the problematic of exclusion and the drive towards totalizing representation that it rests upon. The margins in this sense do not refer to an empirical or sociological position as in standpoint theory, but rather one that seeks to displace the center. If the feminism that occupies the center (in terms of being hegemonic on the global stage) deploys universals that are predicated upon the consolidation of “woman,” the task at hand is to engage the universal otherwise. As Judith Butler argues in a piece titled “Contingent Foundations,” the imperative to establish totalizing universals shuts down the possibility for debate and the opening to alternative claims. Martha Nussbaum’s “central human capabilities” closes itself off from contestation in exactly these ways, by equating the questioning of its principles with an affront against human rights. In the case of Nussbaum’s platform, the difference that opposes and thus violates the universal definition of the “human” is given an empirical and specifically racialized substance. As such, the universal that is housed in human rights is opposed to the particular defined as the other marked by “culture.” Rather than approaching universals as foundations that are self-evident and unquestionable, as Nussbaum does, Butler conceptualizes universals as operations of power that must always be kept open to question. For her, democracy resides precisely in challenging positions that claim to exist outside of power, which I take to include those that present themselves as committed to bettering the condition of humanity by way of interventions at the level of the global. The mobilization of women’s rights as human rights is one of these positions, which is subtended by the assumption that “woman” has a nameable and identifiable substance. As we have seen throughout, this concept of “woman” not only establishes regulatory parameters concerning sexual difference, but continually erects boundaries around what is proper to the human. A feminism from the margins must therefore work against the injunction to secure the legibility and coherence of “woman,” even though (or perhaps exactly because) the consolidation of this category may at times be necessary or the only political route available. Recalling that the margin also gains meaning in relation to the center, and is constituted through its relationship with the center, is instructive at the closing of this dissertation. To forget this not only allows the center to appear autochthonous and self-identical, but also nostalgically views

the margins as a pure site of resistance. In this sense, the opening onto another feminism does not escape “woman” but is also ultimately bound to her. For this reason, the study of “woman” cannot come to an end; there’ll always be something new.

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