

Five

WHAT RACE IS YOUR SEX?

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THE QUESTION "What race is your sex?" or its corollary "what sex is your race?" may seem nonsensical at first, particularly to white people. When I pose it to students, regardless of race or ethnicity their faces tend to go to a startled blank. The question seems unanswerable to many of them, like a Zen koan. Common use separates the etiology of "race" and "sex," assuming the factors that determine "race" to be independent of the factors that determine "sex" or "gender." As African Americans and other peoples of colors particularly know, race affects one's experience and even embodiment of one's gender, and gender affects one's experience and even embodiment of race. But it is difficult for everyone fully to digest the co-constitutive qualities of race, sex, and gender, or the utter dependence of one upon the others for meaning and existence. It is this co-constitutive quality of race, sex, and gender that I am interested in, primarily because of the support each construction gives in the modern West to the tenacity of white supremacy.

To make the claim that sex, gender, and race all constitute each other (suggesting, for example, that whiteness itself has a gender) supposes an unseemly or even grotesque conflation of "natures." In fact, correlating race and sex or gender brings into question the natural status of all three categories, implying that they could be otherwise, unmooring them from nature and thereby disrupting just about everything taken for granted in modernity. To make such a sweeping claim means that simplistic biological definitions of race, sex, and gender

cannot apply. However, given the ambiguity of race, gender and sexuality on scientific or genetic grounds, I believe that we are justified in assuming all three to be largely other than biology.¹

But saying that race is largely other than skin color, facial features, and hair texture; that sex is largely other than genital and libidinal formation; and that gender is largely other than hormonal deployment does not mean that the categories of race, sex, and gender become meaningless or ungrounded. Anne McClintock points out, for example, that to "dispute the notion that race is a fixed and transcendent essence, unchanged through the ages, does not mean that 'all talk of race must cease,' nor does it mean that the baroque inventions of racial difference 'had no tangible or terrible effects.'" On the contrary, she argues, "it is precisely the inventedness of historical hierarchies that renders attention to social power and violence so much more urgent."² The very same point can be made when disputing the notion that sex and gender are fixed and transcendent essences.

It is difficult to think around the corners of the world one inhabits, or to glimpse the limits and gaps in one's own inherited view. While specific modern theorizations of racial, sexual, and gender difference began in the late eighteenth century, were cast increasingly into scientific terms in the nineteenth, and only began to disintegrate late in the twentieth century,³ biologicistic and reductive assumptions about race, sex, and gender as divinely ordained, physically based distinctions between humans remain common. This means that in modern conceptualizations, race, sex, and gender function as more or less benign signifiers of "natural" (and so immutable) human difference. From this viewpoint, it is what people *do* with the "natural differences" of race, sex or gender that may not be so benign, but that is not the fault of "nature" (or God). Lately, however, as modernity shows more and more cracks, Western conceptions of reality and particularly of race, sex, and gender become increasingly brittle, exposing their relatively recent invention and their enmeshment in Western colonial enterprises. The idea of race, sex, and gender as meaningful signifiers

of so-called natural difference is less and less persuasive, and certainly less and less benign.

I am in fact convinced that race, sex, and gender are not only constructed for particular purposes of social order but that to contemplate them in isolation from each other is to perpetuate their more insidious social and political effects and to ignore their more profound theological implications. Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham's notion of race as a "metalanguage" rather than a stable identifier rooted in biology is helpful here in contemplating race, sex, and gender together.⁴ Since the start of European colonial expansion which, as Robert Young says so vividly, "ended in the Western occupation of nine tenths of the surface territory of the globe,"⁵ Higgenbotham argues that race has served as a "global sign" or "ultimate trope of difference, arbitrarily contrived to produce and maintain relations of power and subordination."⁶ Taken together, I argue that race and sex co-constitute a corporate merging of meanings located in human and divine hierarchies that solidify the power and make resilient the supremacy of white people, exemplified in the white male from which, in this view, all others differentiate in useful degrees of degenerate separation.

In each case, modern concepts of race, sex, and gender extrapolate an immutable nature from a few "arbitrarily contrived" features and each, ironically, requires constant reiteration and enforcement to remain constant or immutable. "Race" extrapolates nature and behavioral norms (who one is and how one should behave) from the color of skin and other geographically based, hereditary characteristics of appearance that apply regardless of other hereditary contradictions or changes. "Sex" extrapolates nature and behavioral norms from a few selected genetic features focused on the genitals that apply regardless of other genetic features, contradictions, or changes. And "gender" extrapolates nature and behavioral norms from social claims about "the nature of sex" and selected behavioral patterns nominally identified as masculine or feminine regardless of other behavioral patterns, contradictions, or changes. The result of this is not

a reliable and consistent explanation of human difference but a set of *ideologies* of race, sex, and gender — ideologies that serve to keep individual persons in place. This dynamic might not be so troubling if the "places" assigned to different groups of persons based on race, sex, and gender did not blatantly serve larger systems of privilege and power. How ideologies of race, sex, and gender intersect and produce each other and thereby resist change is what interests me in my own work as a white woman committed to the dogged, daily, and sometimes intimate task of subverting white supremacy.

The issue that I plan to raise here is neither small nor is it smooth. A great deal of white evasion from our complicity in white supremacy is accomplished by efforts to "complicate the issue" with other, attendant concerns (like sexism, heterosexism, or classism). It is not my intention to evade white complicity here, but rather to search out some of the many ways that white supremacy eludes even the most seasoned, committed, and trustworthy anti-racist whites when it goes incognito in the guise of unexamined sex, gender, or class ideology. While it may be clear to most that the "isms" are linked in theory, deep understandings of the ways in which modern concepts of race, sex, and gender are *co-constitutive*, meaning that they cannot meaningfully be separated *except* in support of racist and sexist goals, is much more difficult to grasp and even more difficult to practice, particularly for white people, whom the separation most effectively serves.

McClintock makes this very point when she argues that "race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego. Rather, they come into existence *in and through* relation to each other — if in contradictory and conflictual ways."⁷ Lorraine O'Grady puts a finer point on the inseparability and co-constitutive quality of race, sex, and gender in a quote that Evelyn Hammonds uses to begin her essay entitled "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality":

The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of "woman." *White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be* [emphasis added].⁸

If "white is what woman is," then the co-constitutive qualities of race, sex, and gender are such that each becomes nonsensical apart from the others. This becomes especially clear when the gendering of race, or what Abdul JanMohamed calls "racialized sexuality," is more vividly limned.⁹ Furthermore, one of the consequences of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European expansion and the Atlantic slave industry is that race and gender constitute each other in such powerful and necessary ways that separating them from each other serves to mask the naturalizing functions of colonialism and so masks the pervasive tenacity of white supremacy. White supremacy, in service first to European colonial expansion and then in service to global capitalism, lies at the heart of the race/sex co-constitution, a co-constitution that ultimately functions to preserve the power and privilege of white males in a symbolic and very material economy of human diversity, positioned for the maintenance of its own order and the benefit of a few.

Modernity, a period beginning roughly with the scientific revolution and the emergence of European competition for colonial power and wealth (at the cost of millions of African and Native American lives), denotes the rise of global industrial capitalism and its attendant obsessions with property and individualism. To say that race, sex, and gender are inventions of modernity does not mean that prior to this period meaningful concepts of race, sex, or gender did not exist. Certainly people in every culture have always found ways to distinguish between themselves in terms of sexual and reproductive practices,

familial allegiances, and affectional behavior. Among others, for example, Helen Scott has argued that prior to colonial expansion, race was understood generally by Europeans to refer to familial lineages rather than to whole classes of nations and tribes. This earlier understanding materially served a feudal system of indentured servitude and class division based flexibly on individual families in ways that a modern conceptualization of race would not have done. It is only with the rise of labor-ravenous industries and agricultures in England and the Americas that a conceptualization of race based on entire nations and continents served and took hold.¹⁰

Likewise, sex and gender conceptualizations follow more or less economic trajectories that, enmeshed with emergent concepts of race, morphed into categories of difference that primarily served European and American colonial capitalism. While the labor of reproduction falls most heavily on females in most cultures of the world, in the European colonial enterprise gender became racialized and classed specifically in service of creating an endless labor pool for the growing industries of the North and the growing plantations of the American South on the one hand, and in service of perpetuating and maintaining a class of white capitalist beneficiaries on the other.

SEX AND GENDER CO-CONSTITUTED FOR SUPREMACY

Long before the first colonial armada left port, the naturalization of gender difference and of sex had taken place in European thought, firmly establishing the legitimacy of human hierarchies in the absolute position of the male over the female in body, mind, law, and right. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas had harnessed Aristotle to consolidate and systematize a "natural" (meaning God-given and established) Christian hierarchy of males over females. This resulted in what appears as a divinely naturalized set of gendered sexual norms in which maleness is conceived as active and dominant, while femaleness is conceived as passive and subservient. "Natural" gender placements thus determined "natural" sex and sexual practices as well. This

gender and sex hierarchy was not new to the thirteenth century by any means, but Thomas's *Summa Theologica* and *Contra Gentiles* helped further to solidify and legitimize it, making masculinity and dominance co-constitutive terms that began even more explicitly to shape the meaning of "Christian civilization." By the time John Milton wrote the hugely popular *Paradise Lost* in the late seventeenth century, the idea that humans are naturally and perfectly ordered in superior and inferior categories made common sense and was understood to be divinely ordained, European in origin, and absolutely sexualized in character. All this is present in Milton's imagining of Adam and Eve before Satan has approached them:

Whence true authority in men, though both
Not equal, as their sex not equal seem'd;
For contemplation hee and valour form'd,
For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace,
Hee for God only, shee for God in him:
His fair large Front and Eye sublime declar'd
Absolute rule; and Hyacinthine Locks
Round from his parted forelock manly hung
Clust'ring, but not beneath his shoulders broad:
Shee as a veil down to the slender waist
Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dishevell'd, but in wanton ringlets wav'd
As the Vine curls her tendrils, which impli'd
Subjection, but requir'd with gentle sway,
And by her yielded, by him best receiv'd,
Yielded with shy submission, modest pride,
And sweet reluctant amorous delay.¹¹

Here the appearance of the perfect male and perfect female are "gendered" into dominance and submission, codified by sex and ultimately by race. How Adam and Eve's hair look, for example, determines her wanton and subject nature on the one hand, and his "true authority" on the other. Her perfect femaleness is made evident

by her appearance, an appearance codified in both sexual and racial terms familiar to any reader.

The result of such imagistic sex-gender-race conflation in the story of divine creation was deeply insidious in real life, contributing to an emergent economic and social structure based on "biology." First of all, by making passivity a sign of true womanhood, no working-class or slave female could measure up to the basic definition of being a woman and survive by virtue of her class position and its requirement that she labor, although she could still submit to men. Likewise, by making dominance a sign of true manhood, no working-class or slave male could measure up to the basic definition of being a man and survive by virtue of his class position and its requirement that he submit to authority, although he could still dominate some women. In a curious and sometimes homoerotic twist, this co-constitution of gender with class and eventually with race meant (and continues to mean) that manhood is limited but not destroyed by submission to other, more powerful men. From the poorest day laborer to the archbishop of Canterbury, submitting to more dominant males (from boss to God) is preferable to the alternative of submitting to females and so losing all claim to manhood. M. Shawn Copeland has observed, for example, that even in the extremes of slavery European gender hierarchies made their mark as black men were rewarded for dominating black women. Slavery, she argues, not only exploited black women's bodies and sex for labor and reproduction of labor but undermined relationships between black women and black men. "So it was that colonization and slavery, as both ideology and practice, not only sustained patriarchy but also initiated black men into, and rewarded them for, brutalizing *mimesis*."¹²

THE INVENTION OF RACE FOR COLONIAL DOMINATION

If *Paradise Lost* was the Hollywood-style image-maker of eighteenth-century England, then the divinely ordained true woman, spread

across the globe through colonial expansion, was subservient, passive, soft, blonde, and slightly wanton (in need of direction and sexual supervision). Because it is this image of white femininity that defines womanhood in the colonial enterprise, both race and gender are intersecting here in a racialized sexuality. The link of sex and gender to whiteness here lies at the crux of the matter, for, to echo O'Grady, "white is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be." The only way that a statement like this makes sense is through the lens of colonialism and its attendant conflation of sex and race.

In the early and mid-nineteenth century, racial theory was a popular enterprise of European academics and politicians interested in confirming both the superiority of Europeans and the legitimacy of colonial expansion and domination over the rest of the world. The major disagreement among these theorists had to do with whether the different human "races" could be traced to a single source (monogenesis) or to multiple sources (polygenesis). Young points out that polygenesis had the advantage of accounting for differences between human groups on the basis of different origins, allowing Europeans to continue to affirm Enlightenment ideals of equality among "men" by limiting the category of "man" more explicitly and exclusively to those of European descent. But monogenesis had the advantage of squaring with the biblical story of Eden in Genesis 2 and tended to find more adherents despite requiring one more step to solidify white supremacy. From a monogenetic perspective, differences between human groups could be accounted for through theories of degeneration. "This meant that the pure origin of man [sic] was the white male — that universal mean and measure of all things — and that all other forms were a deterioration from this ideal, as a result of gender or geography or both."¹³ The theory of degeneration also fit nicely with the European take on the biblical story of the fall from paradise. Eve, the paradigm of white womanhood, is not male and so represents already a slippage from the ideal, or at least a slippage from the universal mean and measure of all things. Her difference from

Adam serves to highlight the contours of white masculinity through her deficiencies. It is to her that Satan makes his move, ensuring the further degeneration of this ideal of whiteness into the various races.

Because the modern concept of race as biology had to be invented — meaning that prior to the modern slave trade and European colonial expansion there was little or no need for anyone to have a refined theory of biological or scientific differences between people — I am persuaded by the arguments that place economics at the heart of the matter. The significant fact is that American slavery itself did not begin as a race-based institution but rather evolved out of class-based indentured servitude that failed when the demand for labor in Europe and in the Americas far exceeded both the criminal and working classes of those populations.¹⁴ At just the historical moment when Enlightenment ideals about liberty as an endowment of humanity began to be adopted and fought for in both Europe and colonial North America, the cotton and sugar economy of the American South and the concomitant textile factories of the North yawned wide for cheap, permanent labor that indentured servitude could no longer satisfy both because of the changing political idealism of democracy and the savage brutality of the work itself.

At the same time, Europeans vied for control of the world in pursuit of greater economic gain and dominance over trade. The emergence of colonial capitalism with its emphasis on private property also fueled the search for a rationale for acquiring cheaper and cheaper labor, with outright ownership of labor being the ideal. Scientific theories of race served both acquisitive goals, for the most part "substantiating convictions that preceded scientific enquiry,"¹⁵ legitimizing and institutionalizing the already growing practice of complete ownership of human beings, their children, and the products of their labor. Doing so served the twofold purpose of making available to white colonial property owners all non-white peoples for exploitation, without contravening Enlightenment ideals, while simultaneously funneling all of the resulting wealth to themselves.

As a case in point, historians of race point to the story of legal development in the early United States to trace the evolution of theories that sought to associate all blacks incontrovertibly with slavery. To achieve this result, Scott argues:

Whites had to be taught to be white and blacks taught to be black, and the two groups separated.... Laws against miscegenation, intermarriage and association were passed throughout the colonies in the last decade of the seventeenth and first of the eighteenth centuries [and the] former interracial coexistence among laborers was ruthlessly dismantled.¹⁶

The invention of race as an absolute signifier of difference — a “global sign” — was codified in pseudo-scientific theories about biology and evolution that rested on the primacy of whiteness as the standard against which all differences were cited as degeneration and lack. Consequently, race emerged as a theory primarily of whiteness, a condition that is contradictorily evidenced in “nature” and necessarily achieved and maintained through practice. Facial features, skin color, bone structure, and so forth all formed a catalogue of “race” that, while officially disavowed by member nations after 1945 with the UNESCO statements on race, remain a part of common association and even official census and political identification throughout the world today. More subtle and so perhaps at a more powerful and tenacious level, the practices of race evidence the resilience of white supremacy, particularly through race’s co-constituting connections to sex and gender.

THE CO-CONSTITUTION OF SEX, RACE, AND GENDER IN CLASS

Because the issue of the co-constitutive quality of modern concepts of race, sex, and gender begins in colonialism, it makes sense to focus briefly on how race was gendered and sexed in support of colonial expansion and of white supremacy in particular. The evolution and

naturalization of gender hierarchies parallels the evolution and naturalization of race hierarchies, but parallelism does not necessarily imply co-constitution. The fact is that “race scientists” made sex and gender foundational to a racial theory of white supremacy. The link was not accidental. Gendering race gave further legitimacy to both hierarchies, more firmly grounding both sex and race differentials in divinely ordained nature in such a way that the colonial enterprise could progress apace secure in the rightness of white domination of non-white, through the divinely preordained domination of females by males. The legitimacy for both hierarchies came from a theory of natural endowment in which the superior qualities of one group could, through a kind of trickle-down effect, improve the overall position of everyone while further cementing its own dominant position.

For example, many slave traders and investors sought to legitimate their own practices through the notion that slavery in the land of white people was in effect an act of charity, improving the lot of otherwise free African peoples mired in unhappy degeneracy. This same logic became foundational to later capitalist theory, in which the superior endowments of the wealthy would establish an unequal field of competition but insist that free mobility and deployment of these dominant resources improve the overall economic position of all players while further cementing the dominant position of the wealthy. In both equations, the contradictory and misleading motto is “everyone wins.”

The gendering of whiteness as dominant, as global sign of civilization, and therefore as male (and blackness or yellowness or brownness or redness as subordinate, as global sign of “wantonness” and therefore as female) has its roots deep in ancient genderings of reality. The explicit gendering of race, however, could only emerge with the invention of race as a universal concept that occurred in the pseudo-science of race theories of the mid-nineteenth century. The degeneration of the races from original and ideal whiteness could be rationalized through the lens of sex and gender in self-referencing

logic. Just as Adam needed companionship and the opportunity to fully express his perfect manhood through dominance and wise governance, making necessary the emergence of a lesser being from his own body, differentiation in the races ultimately serves to provide the white race with its fullest potential for improvement through exercise of heroic dominance and wise governance over the world.

The white race is thus gendered male by virtue of its dominance, and the non-white races are gendered female, indicating their need for supervision. No other but gender ideology could so neatly turn a differentiation of the races into a normative hierarchy that justifies white supremacy on the one hand, and consolidates the position of upper-class males at the same time. As Robert Young observes:

The "natural" gender relations of European society are once again used to establish the authority of the natural laws that determine the relations between the races. Just as the white male rules at home, so he also lords it abroad. The orthodox hierarchy of gender is confirmed and reaffirmed at the level of race, which then in turn feminizes males and females alike in the black and yellow races. All hierarchies, together with their cultural values, can, it seems, be assimilated, so long as the white male remains on top.¹⁷

Nineteenth-century racial theorists made explicit the association between the gender dominance of males and the claims that they were attempting to establish scientifically about whiteness. This association served to bolster and clarify the dominance of the upper class within Europe by associating color and sex more and more with class position, and so bolstered whiteness as a signifier of rule throughout the world, further legitimating colonial expansion in general. Gender and race both became instruments of class by mirroring the priorities of those already in positions of power. McClintock points out, for example, that preeminent German race theorist Carl Vogt "saw similarities between the skulls of white male infants and those of the white female working class, while noticing that a mature black

male shared his 'pendulous belly' with a white woman who had had many children."¹⁸ The notoriously pendulous bellies of upper-class German males aside (and that is precisely a filter Vogt is attempting to install), these associations served the curious task of masculinizing nondominant females and of feminizing nondominant males to the same end: solidifying the "natural" superiority of the dominant (white) male. The co-constitutive qualities of race, sex, and gender thus conceived allow them to function as stand-ins for one another, making them much more effective and, ultimately, more resilient.

The ideal of womanhood in colonial Europe (soft, subservient, passive, and preferably blonde) clarifies this point. She is also upper-class because all of these qualities cannot be attained by working women. Labor invalidates passivity and softness. This means that subservience alone did not suffice to establish ideal womanhood. Indeed, the most dominated of women were also the least feminized by virtue of enforced labor (through slavery or economic necessity) and the most dominated of men were, contradictorily, the most feminized by virtue of limited power (through slavery or economic necessity). McClintock has documented the dubious gender *and* race of charwomen in Victorian England as an illustration of the gendering and racializing of class that put most women in a conflicted relationship to both womanhood and to whiteness.¹⁹

Despite the dubious gender and race of women who were unable economically to achieve womanhood because it depended on the labor of others, marriage became an important marker of gender *and* race accomplishment, and served the progressive ideal of colonial powers. Through "marriage" a woman can effectively change race by improving her class position. Nineteenth-century French race theorist Joseph Gobineau strove to develop a rationale for colonial expansion through this metaphor of sex and marriage. Since the non-white races were female to the white race's masculinity, the white race harbors a deep attraction for the black and yellow races, literally aching for union and therefore improvement of the issue through marriage. The

THE IMPLICATIONS

If modern concepts of race are fundamentally and ineluctably co-constituted by gender and sex ideologies, and if modern concepts of gender and sex are fundamentally and ineluctably co-constituted by race ideology, it begins to make sense that white supremacy retains a kind of tenacity even among those who claim to be opposed to it, or that sexism and heterosexism persist among those who claim to be opposed to them. White supremacy is structured throughout the modern constellation of race, sex, gender, and class and can take up residence in any of these ports of meaning to weather occasional anti-racist storms, only to reemerge as soon as "success" is proclaimed. In her argument that whiteness and nonwhiteness define each other, Vron Ware points to the tricky issue of sexualized race, suggesting that the "different elements in this system of 'race' and gender identity have no intrinsic meaning; they work only in and through differentiation."²³

Working in and through differentiation means that the terms of whiteness and blackness (as paradigm of not-white) and of femininity and masculinity are so interdependent that they cannot signify anything except the shape of their opposition. And in extremity, as Asian, Hispanic, Native American, and mixed-race scholars have noted, those who are neither white nor black exist in ambiguity or, worse, not at all. According to the vestigial colonial thinking on which "race" depends, however, to the extent that non-black non-whites can display gender, they can gravitate to a race. In an economy of oppositions, one must claim a pole or vaporize. And it is the economy of three-dimensional oppositions between race, sex, and gender that stabilizes white supremacy, in the past and into the present.

In other words, without femininity to define it, masculinity collapses on itself and vaporizes like Oz's Wicked Witch of the West. Likewise femininity cannot hold without masculinity to define it, and whiteness collapses in on itself and vaporizes without blackness, and vice versa. But even more dramatically and to the point here, without

masculinity whiteness collapses, and without femininity blackness collapses. Like a trick drawing that contains two different pictures that you can see only by changing what you look for, one comes into focus on the back of the other and cannot exist except in that relation. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has made this argument clearly in terms of sexuality when she argues that the homosexual closet is a feature of heterosexuality, not of homosexuality. The closet, or exclusion of that which exceeds heterosexuality, limns and makes possible the heterosexual claim about itself.²⁴ It is for this reason that Hammonds admonishes white women to "refigure (white) female sexualities so that they are not theoretically dependent upon an absent yet ever-present pathologized black female sexuality."²⁵

The core of this work for white people, I believe, lies in attention to our investments in *gendered* whiteness, meaning deep-level investments in sexualized and even eroticized assumptions of dominance and submission, authority and passivity that make reconstruction of whiteness a deconstruction of gender and vice versa. To recognize whiteness masquerading as masculinity that understands itself in terms of strength, voice, leadership, vision, direction, and authority may force some of the more tenacious and self-effacing aspects of white supremacy to emerge into public view. One of the reasons that white people have great difficulty undoing our own practices of white supremacy is that the co-constitutive aspects of race, sex, and gender make the practices of whiteness very difficult to perceive in oneself, particularly when they also function as gender and sex. Gender identity is so powerfully reiterative and self-reinforcing that even men who recognize the atrocities of masculinity constructed as dominance tend to suffer deep anxiety over the prospect of "unmanning" themselves and struggle to imagine a nondominant or dominating masculinity that remains both fulfilling and satisfying. It is easier, many men have said to me, to imagine nonsubmissive femininity than it is to imagine masculinity in terms other than dominance.²⁶

This is one way of looking at the stickiness of supremacy in whiteness. It is profoundly difficult and anxiety producing to imagine

whiteness in any other terms than dominance precisely because of its co-constitution with a particularly deep ideology of sex and gender that comes not only from the recent history of colonialism but from the imaginative depths of medieval and early modern Christian theology. It is not insignificant that God stretches out his powerfully male, languidly superior, and vividly white arm across the vastness of the Sistene ceiling to meet the supplicating white arm of his truest mirror image in Adam. There is sex, gender, and race in that construction, and it is not without allure. It is one of many moments that tie whiteness up in masculinity and masculinity up in whiteness, for God is the original white male and Adam is a mere first step down.

The argument that I have laid out here makes the work of disrupting white supremacy much more complicated and difficult, particularly for whites but also for non-whites. However, without this piece of the puzzle, the work against white supremacy may function like a stretched rubber band: if it is not unhooked on *all* points, it will simply rebound with a bitter bite. To put it most bluntly, can we unman ourselves enough to begin to take the supremacy out of whiteness? What would this look like in practical terms? What specific practices, responses, and expectations might have to change in my work and in my interactions to effect a reconstruction of whiteness that does not rest on sexualized race? This is the first question that we must ask ourselves, and we must ask it daily. Can I unman my whiteness enough to seek the guidance of non-whites on issues unrelated to race? Can I unman my whiteness enough to listen? To accept direction and supervision? To take up what James Foreman called "janitorial research"?²⁷ To what lengths am I willing to go to take the gender ideology, the supremacy, out of my whiteness?

Ultimately, I suspect that whiteness has to disappear altogether, since it was created and exists solely on the basis of exclusion for colonial gain. This does not mean that as a white person I must disappear or renounce my family. It also does not relieve me of responsibility for white supremacy and its continued benefits to me and the white members of my family. I also suspect that the demise

of white supremacy will take much longer than I believe it should, and so I must resign myself to small steps and build up my faith in their importance. Right there I poke a pinhole in the balloon of whiteness-as-dominance. I take up the very un-white suggestion that Sharon Welch makes, namely, that I let go of my need for control over the results of my efforts and credit for their completion.²⁸

Letting go of that need is letting go of one brick in the edifice of white supremacy that masquerades as masculinity, and of masculinity that functions as dominance. Welch calls this an "ethic of control" and advocates instead, based on her own study of African American women's writings, a pragmatic "ethic of risk" that does not pretend to control outcomes but keeps on anyway, believing in the value of actions that may not win wars or conquer evils, but that keep possibilities open for the next generation. That much we can do, and by valuing that, letting go of such deeply ingrained needs to direct, to lead, to chair, to receive credit, to determine priorities, to win arguments, we begin to take the supremacy out of whiteness and the dominance out of masculinity.

NOTES

1. See "The Human Genome," *Science* 291, no. 5507 (February 2001): 16. For a lay discussion on the complexities of interpreting the human genome project in relation to race, see Steve Olsen, "The Genetic Archaeology of Race," *Atlantic Monthly* (April 2001).
2. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.
3. Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 91.
4. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1991-2): 251-74.
5. Young, *Colonial Desire*, 91.
6. Higginbotham, quoted in Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 136.
7. McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 5.
8. Hammonds, "Black (W)holes," 136.

9. Abdul JanMohamed, "Sexuality on/of the Racial Border: Foucault, Wright, and the Articulation of 'Racialized Sexuality,'" *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, ed. Domna Stanton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 94–116.
10. Helen Scott, "Was There a Time before Race? Capitalist Modernity and the Origins of Racism," in *Marxism, Modernity and Post-Colonial Studies*, ed. Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 167–82.
11. John Milton, *Paradise Lost, Book IV*, lines 295–308, from *Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Signet Classic, 1968), 88.
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15. Young, *Colonial Desire*, 93.
16. Scott, "Was There a Time before Race?" 174.
17. Young, *Colonial Desire*, 111.
18. McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 55.
19. *Ibid.*, 75–180.
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27. See Robert Coles, "Method," in *The Call of Service: A Witness to Idealism* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1993), 9–13.
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Six

EL TESTIGO VERDADERO LIBRA LAS ALMAS*

The Central America Peace Movement and Anti-Rac

BECKY THOMPSON

FOR MANY ANTI-RACIST ACTIVISTS, "doing our first work" includes reckoning with early messages that most of that English is the dominant and most valuable language, United States is the most important country in the world, and white people are the best qualified to run it. White people learn lessons in little and big ways from when we are very young. We learn English elitism when English is enforced in nursery school and kindergarten classes. We learn ethnocentrism when the land of countries other than the United States are considered the best in grade school and on up the educational ladder. And we learn white supremacy when the media, family, and schools reinforce power in theory and practice. Resisting white supremacy and ethnocentrism and English elitism, involves confronting racism as a global phenomenon. We can't understand slavery in the United States, for example, without knowing about the international trade. We can't comprehend the assault on unionized jobs and labor in the United States without grappling with U.S. colonialism that left many Latin American countries vulnerable to Free Trade labor exploitation, and NAFTA.

*"The true witness liberates souls." *Santa Biblia*, Proverbs 14:25 (New York: Society of the Holy Bible, 1960), 516.