

Africa Observed

Discourses of the Imperial Imagination

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Let us ... contrast piety with atheism, the philosopher with the rude savage, the monarch with the Chief, luxury with want, philanthropy with lawless rapine: let us set before us in one view, the lofty cathedral and the straw-hut, the flowery garden and the stony waste, the verdant meadow and the arid sands. And when our imagination shall have completed the picture, and placed it in a light which may invite contemplation, it will, I think, be impossible not to derive from it instruction of the highest class. (William Burchell 1824:2,444)

The imagined landscape of Africa was greatly elaborated in late eighteenth-century Britain, albeit less as an end in itself than as a byproduct of the making of modern European self-consciousness (cf. Said 1978; Asad 1973; Gates 1986). Its features were formed in the context of vigorous arguments about humanity, reason, and civilization – debates that were driven by the social and cultural upheavals that accompanied the rise of capitalism and that forced the nations of Europe to refashion their sense of themselves as polities on a world map. Africa became an indispensable term, a negative trope, in the language of modernity; it provided a rhetorical ground on which a new sense of heroic history could be acted out (cf. Godzich 1987).

More than anything else, perhaps, abolitionism subsumed the great debates and discourses of the age. For it raised all the crucial issues involved in the contested relationship between European and Other, savagery and civilization, free labor and servitude, man and commodity; the ideological stuff, that is, from which a liberal hegemony was being made. As Davis (1975:350) has noted, the antislavery movement replayed Adam Smith's message in another key, making of it a program for global social transformation: that all classes of society should be recognized as sharing a natural identity of interest; that the common wealth depended on the liberty of everyone to pursue their own ends in an unfettered material and moral economy.

Abolitionism, as some have claimed, might have been a pragmatic attempt to resolve contradictions in the culture of postenlightenment Britain. And it clearly was a dispute about the merits and morals of different modes of colonial production. But it was also an exercise in mobilizing new forms of representation and communication (see Anderson 1983) to arouse the middle and laboring classes to a passion for epic reform; the controversy was widely aired in mass-circulating pamphlets, newspapers, and religious tracts, as well as in the discriminating columns of the literary reviews. And it drew upon a number of related discourses which alike had become sites for the formulation of a coherent bourgeois awareness. These discourses arose out of a number of distinct but related fields of exploration. Each aimed to construct what Heidegger (1977:115f.; see Godzich 1987:xiv) has identified as a mechanism of mastery, an explanatory scheme capable of objectifying nature and representing it to the knowing, synthesizing human subject. Most significant among them – at least in shaping the consciousness of our evangelists – were the discoveries of the geographical mission to Africa; the investigations into human essence and difference within the emerging life sciences; and the mythology of the noble savage celebrated by the romantic movement (Curtin 1964:34), which explored otherness in a variety of aesthetic genres. Each of these discourses had its own institutional context and expressive forms. But each played off the others – often in productive discord – and conduced to an increasingly rationalized debate about the nature of civilization, the civilization of nature. And together, by virtue of *both* their form and their content, they established the dark continent as a metaphysical stage on which various white crusaders struck moral postures (Achebe 1978:9).¹

The symbolic terrain of a rarely-seen Africa, then, was being shaped by a cascade of narratives that strung together motley “scientific facts” and poetic images – facts and images surveyed by an ever more roving European eye. As this suggests, the rhetoric of light and dark, of color and culture, was already palpable in contemporary Europe, though it had not yet taken on the full fan of connotations it was to bear in Victorian thought. Hume (1854:3,228n), after all, had argued that

“there scarcely ever was a civilized nation of [Negro] complexion,” and Rousseau had echoed his sentiment that blacks were mentally inferior by nature.² Those who opposed abolition argued that slavery was the “natural law” of Africa, as much part of the condition of savagery as the cannibalism and wanton bloodshed so luridly described by some observers (Dalzel [1793] 1799; Norris [1789] 1968). Abolitionists tended to respond by blaming the slave trade itself for deforming the normal progress of civilization (Austen and Smith 1969:79). Either way, Africa was degraded and debased.

It was also inextricably entangled in a western embrace. Romantic poets might have envisaged Africans living lives free of Europe (Brantlinger 1985:170), but the weight of public opinion at the turn of the nineteenth century suggested the opposite. So, too, did the sheer weight of evidence. Whether as purveyors or reformers of the “evil traffic,” white men had written themselves into the present and future of the continent. Whatever else it might have entailed, abolitionism did not argue for European withdrawal from Africa. It made the case for the replacement of one mode of colonial extraction with another. Once emancipated, his humanity established, the savage would become a fit subject of Empire and Christendom.

In this chapter we examine each of the discourses through which Africa came to be imagined, tracing their confluence to the argument over slavery itself. In so doing, we witness the rise of a more and more elaborate model of the relationship of Europe to the “dark continent”: a relationship of both complementary opposition and inequality, in which the former stood to the latter as civilization to nature, savior to victim, actor to subject. It was a relationship whose very creation implied a historical imperative, a process of intervention through which the wild would be cultivated, the suffering saved. Life would imitate the masterful gestures of art and science. The “native” would be brought into the European world, but as the recipient of a gift he could never return – except by acknowledging, gratefully, his own subordination. And in this colonizing project the Christian missionary would play a special role as agent, scribe, and moral alibi. ...

Into South Africa: Of Maps and Morals

In Britain ca. 1800, West Africa served as stereotype for the continent as a whole. The Cape of Good Hope was a secondary focus of European concern. A small colony administered since 1652 by the Dutch East India Company, it had generated little travel literature, especially in English.³ In 1795, however, the Cape was taken over by Britain as a consequence of her war with the French, who had invaded Holland and were thought likely to seize the Dutch outpost on the sea route to the East (Harlow 1936:171f.). John Barrow, founder of the Royal Geographical Society (which was to absorb the African Association), was appointed personal secretary to Macartney, the new governor of the Colony.⁴ As Macartney's protégé he had accompanied the latter to China in 1792, serving officially as comptroller to the embassy but acting also as observer of Chinese civilization (Lloyd 1970:24). Now he was sent on a tour of the South African interior to represent His Majesty and to investigate the discontents of frontier farmers, whose long-standing resistance to the Dutch Company had been transferred to the new administration.⁵

Barrow's *Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798* (1801–4) was self-evidently a colonial document. A legitimization of the British annexation of the Cape, it also gave eyewitness account of the degradation of the Dutch frontiersmen, who, lacking a European “spirit of improvement and experiment,” had regressed to take on the qualities of their rugged and soporific surrounds (1801–4:1,67; see also Streak 1974:5f.; Coetzee 1988:29f.). The very landscape conveyed this unrefined state to Barrow's eye, schooled as he was on nicely-demarcated European vistas of private ownership (1801–4:1,57):

As none of the [extensive lands] are enclosed there is a general appearance of nakedness in the country ... which ... if divided by fences, would become sufficiently beautiful, as nature in drawing the outline has performed her part.

The Dutch had not investigated the interior systematically and, perhaps most diagnostic for Barrow, had “no kind of chart or survey, save of

such districts as were contiguous to the Cape” (1801–4:1,8). This was taken to indicate lax colonial control, something that the British “spirit of commerce and adventurous industry” would remedy. The frontispiece of Barrow's book has a comprehensive map of the Cape Colony, constructed from bearings, distances, and latitudes observed during his travels. The map presents this land to Britain for the taking, its virgin scapes laid tantalizingly bare, its routes of access picked out in red.

Barrow's *Account* was also a moral geography of the interior of the Cape, one which not so much emptied the landscape of its human inhabitants (Pratt 1985) as denied them any legitimate claim to it. The text cleared the ethical ground for British colonialism by depicting the territory as a polarized human universe of unregenerate natives and degenerate Dutchmen. The dualistic vision of nature in postenlightenment imagery, to which we alluded above and shall return, speaks out here. The Dutch had negated their own humanity by treating the blacks as objects, prey to be “hunted” (1801–4:1,273); they sought to validate a “monstrous” manhood (1801–4:1,145) by exterminating nature's innocents – rather than by elevating them, and all African humanity, through forceful cultivation. Their brutal bravado was founded on a myth of savagery that Barrow feels called upon to dispel (1801–4:1,196):

It is a common idea, industriously kept up in the colony, that the Kaffers⁶ are a savage, treacherous, and cruel people, a character as false as it is unmerited ...

Likewise, speaking of the Khoisan, he adds that the “Hottentots” (Khoi) were “mild, quiet, and timid people, perfectly harmless, honest, faithful,” their timeless customary existence destroyed by Dutch abuse (1801–04:1,151); and the “Bushmen” (San) were “like frightened children” mowed down by Boer bullets as they played with bows and arrows (1801–4:1,273).

These observations were grounded in the very real fact of genocide; there is plenty of collateral evidence to prove that a war of extermination had been waged along the frontier against the Khoisan (see e.g. Marais 1944; Marks 1972; Elphick and Malherbe 1989). Nor is there any doubt that Barrow

believed himself to be writing a *historical* account of both Boer and Bushman, explaining how each had been affected by the violent encounter with the other. Nonetheless, there is in this historiography another process at work. In building his stereotypic contrasts, Barrow, intentionally or not, was also fleshing out an imaginative structure, a set of oppositions which came to be shared by many of his contemporaries (see Coetzee 1988:29f.). The Dutch farmer was European civilization grown rotten in the African sun – his “nature” made yet more degenerate, his “indolence of body and low groveling mind” corrupted yet further by being an owner and master of slaves (Barrow 1801–4 quoted by Coetzee 1988:29; see also Philip 1828,1:367f.; Moodie 1835:1,176). He was the very antithesis of Protestant enlightenment, having willfully permitted his own debasement. The “savage tribes,” made so brutish by seventeenth-century Dutch reports (see Willem ten Rhyne in Schapera 1933), were really innocent and ignorant. They might dance and sing when moved by their childish passions, and slept in beds “like the nest of an ostrich” (1801–4:1,148,275). While “low on the scale of humanity,” they were raw material for the civilizing project. For, notwithstanding their common predicament as “miserable savages” (1801–4:1,287) in opposition to the British, peoples such as the “Hottentots” had their own nobility. This *Account*, in short, validated the moral scheme of the first LMS and WMS missionaries to South Africa, coloring their view of the white perverts and would-be black converts who peopled the interior.

Barrow’s social position guaranteed him a wide readership among scholars, politicians, and the literate public. The natural historian Lichtenstein ([1815] 1930,2:12) noted at the time that in his native Germany the “journals and almanacks” vied to publish the British author’s accounts of the “ignorance, the brutality, the filthiness” of the Dutch colonists. Lichtenstein himself had traveled in the interior of South Africa between 1803 and 1806 in the employ of the Dutch government. His own two volume narrative appeared in German in 1810 and 1812 and in English in 1812 [repr. 1928] and 1815 [repr. 1930]. It was highly critical of Barrow’s portrayal of the Dutch farmers and their brutal domination of the “Caffres” (1928:1,59):

I was led almost daily to ask myself whether these were really the same African colonists which the celebrated Mr Barrow represented as such barbarians, as such more than half-savages – so much did I find the reality in contradiction to his description.

Again we are reminded that images of Africa are born of European arguments about their own essential nature.⁷ Barrow was accused of betraying his own kind; of failing, as an educated European, to credit the effects of the African climate and hence to understand the “rough Cape peasantry” and their relation to the blacks (1930:2,6–13). Yet, lying beneath the surfaces of the debate, is a set of shared constructs that makes the dispute possible in the first place. Lichtenstein does not really take issue with Barrow’s portrayal of Africans, although his own descriptions lack the Englishman’s stress on their innocence and vulnerability. For him, “Bushmen” are miserable and voracious: “no class of savages ... lead lives so near those of brutes” or are so low on the “scale of existence” (1930:2,244). But, he adds (1930:2,65):⁸

The rude rough man left entirely in a state of nature, is not in himself evil and wicked. ... [He] follows blindly the impulse of his passions, which lead him to acts, that to us, in the high point of civilization we have attained, appear as crimes ...

Africa might have become a moral battlefield, but its representation in late eighteenth-century Europe also reflected a conceptual order fast spreading among persons “of reason,” an essential humanism in terms of which man became his own measure (Foucault 1975). No longer satisfied with a notion of himself as God’s passive creature, he sought to define his “place in nature” (Thomas 1984:243 et passim); that is, to assess his position on a scale of humanity rather than on a ladder to heaven. A new narrative of human types was being written, and the African was to have a definite niche in it. As a foil to the enlightened European, he was doubly devalued: human yet ignorant of salvation to begin with, he had now lost his innocence at the hands of civilization’s most depraved elements, slavers and the degenerate white men of

the tropics.⁹ Here, as we have said, the texts of travelers and explorers became entangled in the debate over abolition (see Barrow 1801–04:1,46). But the discourse also informed, and was informed by, arguments within the related field of natural history and the emerging science of biology.

The New Biology and the Great Chain of Being

In the early nineteenth century the life sciences were preoccupied with the “great chain of being” – and especially with its lower half. As Figlio (1976:25) observes, contemporary debates about man’s place in nature hinged upon the relationship of the human species to the rest of the living world:

There was a focusing upon the multi-faceted idea of animality, as opposed to an insistence upon a scalar, uni-dimensional hierarchy, with man at the top of the visible, and God at the top of the invisible, realm.

Rooted in the contrast between the animate and the inanimate, this focus on animality implied a concern with the properties of “life” common to all beings. And it fixed on man as the embodiment of perfection, since he alone had distinguished himself by using reason to discover his own essence. This in turn led inexorably to the concept of “generic human nature” (Stocking 1987:17), a notion that separated man from beast, people from objects, and rendered anomalous anything – like the slave trade – that confused them. But “human nature” was a highly abstract category. Once put to work in the world it was immediately subject to internal differentiation. This is where the chain of being served as a powerful metaphor, for it conjured up a hierarchy of distinct varieties within (a single) humankind.

In the epistemology of the time, then, the key to knowledge seemed to lie increasingly within man himself. The essence of life was in the unplumbed depths of organic being, to be grasped through the invasive thrust, the looking and naming, of the new biology (Foucault 1975). Its interior truth, merely signified in outer bodily form, gave rise to meaningful differences in the faculties and function of living beings.

African bodies, African nature

We have already encountered traces of this epistemology in the geographical mission, where the thrust into the African interior likened the continent to a female body. Bernhard Fabian (quoted in Nerlich 1987:179) reminds us that, in the late eighteenth century, the qualities of the scientific “spirit” were identified with the heroic “spirit” of the adventurer: the natural scientist’s penetration into hitherto unknown realms had become one with the advance into regions unknown. The newly charted surfaces of the African landscape were to have a direct connection with the universe opening up within the person, for the geographical mission expanded European knowledge of the global biology of mankind. In investigating the savage, the West set up a mirror in which it might find a tangible, if inverted, self-image. Non-Europeans filled out the nether reaches of the scale of being, providing the contrast against which cultivated man might distinguish himself. On this scale, moreover, the African was assigned a particularly base position: he marked the point at which humanity gave way to animality. In treating him as the very embodiment of savagery, of deviance from a racially-defined ideal (Gould 1981:38), the travel and adventure literature gave ostensibly objective, precise descriptions of both his bodily form and his “manners and customs.” In such popular accounts, in other words, African “nature” was grounded in the color, shape, and substance of the black physique.

With the rise of comparative anatomy and biology as formal sciences, the organic reduction of African society and culture took on ever greater authority. For much of the eighteenth century it had been civilization that separated savage man from his white counterpart – moral and politico-economic circumstance rather than physical endowment (Stocking 1987:18). But the vocabulary of natural science was to strengthen and legitimize the association of dark continents with black bodies and dim minds. Comparative anatomical schemes typically presented Africans as the most extreme contrast with Europeans – in the new technical argot, the “link” between man and beast (Curtin 1964:42). Linnaeus’ *Systema Naturae*, first published in 1735, laid out in initial form what

would soon become a convention of biological classification: a chromatic scale of white, yellow, red, and black races, each native to one of the four major continents (Gould 1981:35; Curtin 1964:37). As in the popular literature of travel and adventure, Africans were invariably placed at the bottom of the ladder of enlightenment, below such paler peoples as Asians or American Indians (Buffon 1791; Blumenbach 1775, 1795; White 1799). By 1778 Buffon, who had added such features as hair, stature, and physiognomy to his scheme, declared that white was the "real and natural colour of man" (quoted in West 1982:56).¹⁰ Blumenbach took this yet further, to the shape of the skull, thereby introducing one of the more pervasive and enduring elements in the annals of racial taxonomy. He went on to claim, on this basis, that the Ethiopian was the lowliest deviation from the "most beautiful" Caucasian type (Street 1975:52ff.). The great chain of being, a vertical scale, had been set on its side, becoming also a linear history of human progress from the peripheral regions of the earth to its north European core. The hard facts of organic form, it seemed, could now explain and determine the place of men in the world.

Science, aesthetics, and selfhood

The life sciences, then, were part of a broader discourse about the human condition – a discourse closely tied to Europe's encounter with the non-European world. Raised to a new level of self-consciousness and authority, their "value free" knowledge found a natural validation for cultural imperialism in the inner secrets of existence. "Natural" scientists read off the degree of animality and the perfection of life from the external features of different "organisms"; for these were taken to be a function of the relative complexity, symmetry, and refinement of the faculties within. Take, for example, the influential Dutch scholar Camper, who, in a manner similar to Blumenbach, devised a scale that correlated the shape of the skull with aesthetic appearance and mental capacity: his "facial angle" measured the projection of the jaw, a protruding profile being linked with the long snouts, low brows, and sensory-bound state of animals. Applied to an eclectic array of "evidence" – including African travelers' accounts – this measurement

defined and ranked national character, giving physical shape to the current philosophical concern with the relationship of race, nationality, and civilization (cf. Hume 1854).

Camper's scale extended from dog through ape to Negro, then through the European peoples to the ideal beauty of form epitomized in Greek sculpture (1821:x; see Figlio 1976:28f.). And it was rapidly publicized well beyond the scientific community, as were his more general pronouncements. Thus the preface to an English translation of his popular lectures addressed an artistic audience on the moral and aesthetic implications of the science of comparative anatomy (1821:x):

[The] grand object was to shew, that national differences may be reduced to rules; of which the different directions of the facial line form a fundamental norma or canon ... the knowledge of which will prevent the artist from blending the features of different nations in the same individual ...

Nationality, physical type, and aesthetic value are condensed here into an iconography that would in due course become part of the language of scientific racism. With his apartheid of the sketchpad, Camper imprinted the bodily contours of stereotypic others on the European imagination – and with them, a host of qualitative associations. His sample African profile, for instance, a distinctly bestial representation, was to become standard in nineteenth-century texts on racial difference; significantly, these texts gave prominence to images of black South Africans.

Georges Cuvier, the prestigious Swiss comparative anatomist of the early nineteenth century, took the facial angle and the biological reduction of culture to new levels of sophistication. He developed a scale to evaluate the perfection not only of the intellect but also of the introspective self, the moral core of the person. By gauging the proportion of the mid-cranial area to that of the face, he sought to reveal the degree of dependence of an organism upon external sensations; the size of the cranium itself was taken to reflect the development of reason and self-control. On this count, the "negro" stood between the "most ferocious apes" and the Europeans, who were themselves superseded by the men and deities of ancient Greek sculpture

(Figlio 1976:28). But it was the neurological dimension of Cuvier's scheme (1827:1,49f.) that raised most explicitly the spiritual and moral capacity of man. For the nervous system was the site of internal animation, and its complexity determined the higher faculties of life – intelligence and volition. The latter were expressions of a “soul or sentient principle,” whose source of vitality remained, at the time, a matter of serious debate. Scientists, however, were more concerned with the physical organization of this system, which was centered on a compact inner core that reached its most perfect form in the complicated brain of man. As Figlio (1976:24) explains:

... this compactness [was associated] quite explicitly with the higher faculties, indeed with the sense of the “self”. Just as the nervous system coalesced into a centre from which dependent nerves arose, so too was the sense of self increasingly solidified and distinct. Thus, a grading of this ... concentrating of the nervous system was simultaneously a grading of animal sentience and selfhood.

And so the bourgeois subject of the new Age of Capitalism, already secure in the Protestant ethic and rational philosophy, was given incontestable grounding in biological nature. Needless to say, the inner density and refinement associated by Cuvier with self-awareness and control were held to be underdeveloped among non-Europeans. This was especially true of blacks, who were bound by the animal reflexes of survival (1827:1,97; see Curtin 1964:231):

The negro race is confined to the south of Mount Atlas. Its characters are, black complexion, woolly hair, compressed cranium, and flattish nose. In the prominence of the lower part of the face, and the thickness of the lips, it manifestly approaches to the monkey tribe. The hordes of which this variety is composed have always remained in a state of complete barbarism.

Cuvier's writings were summarized in the British biomedical press within months of their publication and were assiduously discussed by scientists, theologians, and men of letters (Figlio 1976:35).

In an age when specialist knowledge was not yet set apart by technical language, work such as this – and that of Camper – was rapidly directed to a receptive, almost insatiable public. Often, as in one widely read translation of Cuvier's *Animal Kingdom*, some “popular and entertaining matter” was added on the instincts and habits of animals and primitive man (1827:1,i–ii). The editors in this particular instance included a description of the “unhappy races” of South Africa, a telling bricolage of current European curiosity, with substantiating material drawn from the accounts of travelers like Barrow and Lichtenstein. Thus were the discoveries of geographical adventure converted into a scientific currency in which the universal value of man might be reckoned.

As these travel tales and salon exotica gained scientific credentials, they hardened into stereotypic representations of Africa. Their influence on the eye of subsequent European observations in South Africa was to be tangible. Cuvier's editors (1827:1,197), for example, provided an account of the “Bushmen” as pygmy “plunderers” who “lurk[ed]” in the complicit woods and bushes. This description seems to have been drawn directly from Lichtenstein (1928:1,68n), yet we encounter it, metaphor intact, in the “eyewitness” report given many years afterwards by the Rev. Edwards (1886:66). The interplay of other epithets in the *Animal Kingdom* – “Hottentots” as degraded and disgusting, or as swarthy, filthy, and greasy – may also be traced to Lichtenstein (1928:1,69).¹¹ They too were to flow from the pens of later writers who claimed the authority of firsthand experience.

One item among the potpourri of curiosities in the *Animal Kingdom* (1827:1,196) was a description of the “Hottentot Venus,” an “essential black” from the Cape Colony. This unfortunate “wild” woman of Khoi ancestry had been taken to Europe and made into a traveling exhibit, shown first in England and then, by an animal trainer, in France. She died in Paris in 1815 after European audiences had gazed in fascination at her for some five years – and promptly ended up on Cuvier's dissecting table (Gould 1985:294). His famous account of her autopsy was to be reprinted twice within a decade of its publication; it centered on the anomalies of her “organ of generation,” which,

in its excessive development of the *labia minora*, was held to set her kind apart from other human beings (Gilman 1985:212). Barrow, too, had written of the genital aberrations of Khoisan women, and a host of anatomical reports were to follow Cuvier in focusing on the exotic, simian qualities of black female reproductive organs. A barely suppressed infatuation with the torrid eroticism of Africa made itself respectable as biological inquiry.

The story of the Hottentot Venus reminds us that Mungo Park, albeit in somewhat different idiom, had also reduced Africa to the body of a black female yielding herself to white male discovery. This mytheme, as we shall see, was repeated in both the poetry of romantic naturalists and the sober prose of our missionary crusaders. But Cuvier's writings show particularly plainly how early nineteenth-century science actually articulated and authorized such constructions – how the various products of current European fancy sailed under the colors of biological knowledge about man, woman, and nature. Nor did the ideological message of this material remain implicit. Supplementary details on African peoples in the *Animal Kingdom* (1827:1,196) were summarized with the confident statement that “a physical obstacle to their progress seemed to be a more natural solution to [the] problem [of their lack of development] than any political or local circumstances.”

The nature of gender

As all this suggests, the “signifying economy” (Godzich 1987:xi) of otherness took in gender as well as race. That “economy” has a long history, of course. But we need only break into it at the dawn of modernism. “Sometime in the late eighteenth century,” Lacquer (1986:1) observes, “human sexual nature changed.” It certainly did. With the reorganization of production and perception in the age of revolution, novel distinctions arose in the construction of gender. And they raised the problematic “nature of woman” to consciousness in Europe as never before.

Given the epistemology of the time, it was inevitable that this new consciousness should find the source of gender relations in the bodies of men

and women – and that biology should be invoked to explain a division of labor already established in economy and society. The ideology of the enlightened free market might celebrate equality and a generic humanity. But its material practices sanctioned the exploitation of whole categories of people, usually on the basis of “natural” distinctions like race and sex. Such stigmatizing signs often come to imply each other: in late eighteenth-century images of Africa, the feminization of the black “other” was a potent trope of devaluation. The non-European was to be made as peripheral to the global axes of reason and production as women had become at home. Both were vital to the material and imaginative order of modern Europe. Yet both were deprived of access to its highest values. Biology again provided the authoritative terms for this simultaneous process of inclusion and disqualification.

In sum, the manner in which Africa was portrayed as woman – with reference in particular to the organs of procreation – was an extension of a gender ideology fast taking root in late eighteenth-century Europe. Here “the female body in its reproductive capacity and in its distinction from that of the male, [had come] to occupy a critical place in a whole range of political discourses” (Lacquer 1986:1). As the biology of childbearing became the essence of womanhood, it also seemed to prescribe an increasingly radical, physically-derived contrast between male and female. For centuries prior to this time, both medical and commonsense knowledge appear to have assumed that women had the same reproductive organs as men; that they were “men turned outside in” (Lacquer 1986:1). Moreover, gender identity had not been vested in the anatomy of procreation alone but in more general features of moral and social disposition. In this respect too there was a continuity between male and female: far from “a total division of mental properties between the sexes,” as Jordanova (1980:63) puts it, there had been “a continuum according to which reason dominated ...”

Reason and intelligence were male properties, of course; men and women had thus been arrayed along a single axis whose telos was masculine (Lacquer 1986:3). But the struggle between the two qualities had occurred within rather than

between individuals, each person's temperament being the product of both. Here Foucault's insight into changing perceptions of hermaphrodites throws light on the emergence of modern gender identity. In his introduction to the memoirs of *Herculine Barbin* (1980:viif.), he notes that medieval canon and civil law defined them as people in whom the two sexes were juxtaposed in variable proportions. By the nineteenth century, however, it had become the task of the medical expert to "find the one true sex of the so-called hermaphrodite" (Davidson 1987), to reveal the unambiguous biological reality that underlay uncertain appearances.

The premodern language of gender had also integrated physical, mental, and social qualities, making the body an icon of moral as much as of procreative status. Jordanova (1980:49) notes that medical and philosophical writings in the eighteenth century focused on the breast as a symbol of the valued role of women in domestic nurture. The shift of attention to the uterus in nineteenth-century biology marked a retreat into the hidden recesses of gynaecological anatomy, whence female nature now seemed to emanate.

The new biology of difference and incommensurability, then, shackled women to their sexual nature as resolutely as it freed men – or at least European men – from the constraints of instinct and bodily function. "It was," one physician explained, "as if the Almighty, in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built up a woman around it" (Holbrook 1882; quoted in Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 1973:335). Here the ideology of gender cut across contemporary models of the nervous system and became implicated in the more general definition of modern selfhood. For, by implication, women's reproductive physiology rerouted their neurological pathways, diffusing the compact density of the rational, male self. As opponents of female education were to argue, the brain and the reproductive organs simply could not develop at the same time. The uterus was assumed to be connected directly to the central nervous system, shaping its constitution and in return being affected by it (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 1973:335).

Women's sensibility was both greater and more labile than that of men, and their nervous systems lacked focus; their "fibres" were "mobile," especially

"those in the uterus" (Macquart 1799; quoted in Jordanova 1980:48). Like the "low brow" non-European, the European female was played upon by strong and frequent sensations from the external environment. Her constitution was passionate and intuitive, susceptible to nervous disorders, and responsive to control by males – particularly men of science (Stocking 1987:199). A privileged relationship of sex and selfhood had been born: with the emergence of the "psyche" in later nineteenth-century thought, sexuality would become the "externalization of the hidden, inner essence of personality" (Davidson 1987:47). This development was prefigured in the vision of missionaries earlier in the century, which placed great diagnostic weight upon sexual propriety as a symptom of "moral fiber." After all, as Davidson reminds us, moral theology had once used "pervert" – a person wilfully turning to evil from good – as an antonym of "convert." There is evidence of this connotation, and of the more modern sense of "sexual deviance," in the evangelists' use of the term.

It has been pointed out (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 1973:338; Stocking 1987:199; Jordanova 1980:49) that contemporary discourses on female nature were neither unanimous nor free of contradiction. Women were held at once to be sensitive and delicate, yet hardy and longer-lived; passionate and quintessentially sexual, yet innocent and intuitively moral. Given the political load that the anatomy of woman had come to bear, such ambiguities were bound to fuel angry dispute; it is not surprising that her body soon became an ideological battleground (Lacquer 1986:24). Feminists and antifeminists both exploited these contradictions, albeit in contrasting ways – the former being no less quick than the latter to appeal to natural differences in making their case. Anna Wheeler and William Thompson (1825; quoted in Lacquer 1986:23), for example, argued that women deserved greater political participation on grounds of their innate moral aptitude and their undesiring, even passionless dispositions. And Fuller (1855), in her manifesto, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, described male and female as "two sides of the great radical dualism," the female system being "electrical in movement" and "intuitive in function" (quoted in Ayala 1977:263). Thus, while the debate raged over social values, its terms

reinforced the hegemony of biological determinism and ineluctable gender distinction.

The new biology, in short, gave legitimacy to an idealized image of rational man. Unlike women and non-Europeans, he was a self-contained individual and was driven by inner reason, not by sensory stimuli from the social and material environment. This image of selfhood appeared simultaneously in a wide range of late eighteenth-century moral and technical discourses; biomedical science was just one voice in a richly redundant chorus, its concern with the inner body drawing attention away from man's dialectical relation with his context. But the reduction did not go unchecked. It was countered by the social reformism of mainstream enlightenment religion and philosophy, which stressed the reconstruction of persons and, through them, the world. Humanitarian and evangelical rhetoric alike had it that the possession of a soul and the capacity to reason made every human being capable of improvement. The self could be "cultured,"¹² the will strengthened by implanting spiritual truth and by "uplifting" physical and social conditions.

Thus the biological determinism of the age was usually qualified by some attention to the effects of environment; conversely, the optimism of philanthropists and evangelists was often tempered by a suspicion that nature placed limits on the ability of some human beings to develop. Nor were scientists undivided on the issues: Gould (1981:31ff.) has distinguished "hard-" from "soft-liners" among significant eighteenth and nineteenth-century thinkers on the question of the African's potential for civilization.¹³ While this distinction may be too rigidly drawn, there certainly were loud and lengthy arguments about the

origin and implications of racial difference. Witness the debate over the role of climate in the origin of human diversity, in which some early naturalists (e.g., Buffon 1791) and biologists (e.g., Blumenbach [1775, 1795] 1969) claimed that negro physical characteristics grew out of life in the tropics (Curtin 1964:40). Here again scientific thought evoked European notions of ecology that went back at least a hundred years – in particular, the humoral theory that "as the air is, so are the inhabitants" (cf. Hodgen 1964:283). In this legacy "southern climes" were repeatedly associated with heat and fecundity, sensuality and decay. For instance, in his defense of Cape Dutchmen against Barrow's attacks, Lichtenstein (1928:1,58) attributed their "phlegm" to the African environment. And for comparative support he quoted Goethe's similar observations of the indolent Neapolitans.

The writings of the South African missionaries suggest that they too perceived a complex connection between African bodies and landscapes. Moreover, their efforts to reform the benighted blacks were to express an unresolved conflict between the incorrigibility of natural endowment and the possibility of human improvement. Visible in the conflict, and in the entire European discourse about savagery, was an increasingly sharp – and gendered – contrast between "nature" (all that exists prior to civil society) and "civilization" or "culture" (collectively wrought existence, though not yet the modern anthropological idea of a distinct, meaningful lifeworld; see Stocking 1987:19; also note 12 above). This dichotomy was elaborated most extensively, perhaps, in the debate over the "noble savage," a chimera which relied heavily on images of Africa already in popular European circulation.

Notes

- 1 Notwithstanding our particular concerns here, it goes without saying that stereotypic images of "others," in Africa and elsewhere, predate the age of revolution. So does their metaphysical significance in European thought and representation. For a valuable history of medieval conceptions of the "monstrous races," see Friedman (1981).
- 2 On Rousseau's views in this respect, see Cook (1936); also Curtin (1964:42).

- 3 Three seventeenth-century accounts were published in Dutch and Latin (see Schapera 1933); two in German followed during the eighteenth century (Kolben 1731; Mentzel 1785–87).
- 4 Barrow's biography was notably similar to that of Park. Both were self-made sons of northern British smallholders (Lloyd 1970).
- 5 [...] The Cape was restored to the new Batavian Republic in 1803 under the Treaty of Amiens but

was seized again by the British in 1806, after the resumption of the Napoleonic Wars (see e.g. Davenport 1969:273f.).

- 6 It is clear that Barrow meant "kaffir" here to include all "aborigines." In the nineteenth century the term (also "Caffre") was often used more specifically to describe the Nguni-speaking peoples of South Africa – although it was later to become a general term of abuse for blacks, much like "nigger" in the United States of America.
- 7 For an account of British images of and attitudes toward the Dutch settlers, see Streak (1974), who also discusses the writings of Barrow and Lichtenstein. We are grateful to Robert Gordon for drawing our attention to this reference.
- 8 Lichtenstein seems to have been the first writer in this genre to make use of missionary observations of black South Africans (see the Prefatory Note to volume 1 of his *Travels* [p.vi], republished by the Van Riebeeck Society in 1928). His work in turn became an important source of European constructions of Africa.

- 9 See Curtin (1964:58f.) on the role of the "tropics" in this discourse.
- 10 We are indebted to Nahum Chandler for this reference, included in his unpublished paper, "Writing Absence: On Some Assumptions of Africanist Discourse in the West."
- 11 Although, as Keith Thomas (1984:42) points out, talk of Hottentots as "beasts in the skin of man" also had earlier precursors.
- 12 As Williams (1976:77) has noted, "culture as an independent noun, an abstract process or the product of such a process, is not important before 1C18 [the late eighteenth century] not common before mC19 [the mid-nineteenth century]." Prior to this, "culture" was a noun of process, implying the "tending of something," usually crops or animals. From the early sixteenth century, the tending of natural growth was gradually extended by metaphor to the process of human development.
- 13 We are indebted to Nahum Chandler for this reference also; see n. 10 above.

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