**descent’s delicate branches: Darwinian visions of race and gender in american women’s literature, 1859-1928**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

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Title: Descent’s Delicate Branches: Darwinian Visions of Race and Gender in American Women’s Literature, 1859-1928

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This dissertation examines Charles Darwin’s major texts together with literary works by turn-of the-century American women writers—Nella Larsen, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Kate Chopin—in order to trace how evolutionary theory shaped transatlantic cultural ideas of race, particularly black identity, and gender. I focus on the concept of “descent” as the overarching theme organizing categories of the human in evolutionary terms. My perspective and methods—examining race and gender from a black feminist perspective that draws on biopolitics theory, as well as using close reading, affect theory, and attention to narrative in my textual analysis—comprise my argument’s framework. By bringing these perspectives and methods together in my attention to the interplay between Darwinian discourse and American literature, I shed new light on the turn-of-the-century transatlantic exchange between science and culture. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that descent constitutes a central concept and point of tension in evolutionary theory’s inscription of life’s development. I also show how themes of human-animal kinship, the Western binary of rationality and materiality, and reproduction and maternity circulated within this discourse. I contribute to scholarly work relating evolutionist discourse to literature by focusing on American literature: in the context of turn-of-the-century American anxieties about racial and gender hierarchies, the evolutionist paradigm’s configurations of human difference were especially consequential. Moreover, Larsen, Gilman, and Chopin offer responses that reveal this hierarchy’s varied effects on racialized and gendered bodies. I thus demonstrate the significance of examining Darwinian discourse alongside American literature by women writers, an association in need of deeper scholarly attention, especially from a feminist, theoretical perspective.

This dissertation begins with my application of literary analysis and close reading to Darwin’s major texts in order to uncover how they formed a suggestive foundation for late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century ideologies of race and gender. I use this analysis as the background for my investigation of Larsen’s, Gilman’s, and Chopin’s literary texts. In Chapter 1, I conduct a close reading of Darwin’s articulation of natural selection in *The Origin of Species* and focus on how Darwin’s syntactical and narrative structure imply evolution as an agential force aimed at linear progress. In Chapter 2, I analyze Darwin’s articulation of the development of race and gender differences in *The Descent of Man*, as well as Thomas Henry Huxley’s *Evidence as to Man’s Place in Nature*, and argue that Darwin’s and Huxley’s accounts suggest how anxiety over animal-human kinship was alleviated through structuring nonwhite races and women as less developed and hence inferior. In Chapter 3, I argue that Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* interrogates and complicates aesthetic primitivism and biopolitical racism and sexism, both rooted in evolutionist discourses. Finally, in Chapter 4, I focus on Gilman’s utopian novel *Herland* and select short stories by Chopin. While Gilman unambiguously advocates for a desexualized white matriarchy, Chopin’s stories waver between support for, and critique of, racial hierarchy. Reading these authors together against the backdrop of white masculine evolutionist theory reveals how this theory roots women as materially bound reproducers of racial hierarchy.

# INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I examine Charles Darwin’s major texts together with literary works by turn-of the-century American women writers—Nella Larsen, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Kate Chopin—in order to trace how evolutionary theory shaped transatlantic cultural ideas of race, particularly black identity, and gender. In doing so, I argue for the significance of recognizing “descent” as the overarching theme organizing categories of the human in evolutionary terms. I therefore investigate not only the cultural ideas penetrating Darwin’s texts, but also evolutionary discourse’s penetration of literary texts. My perspective and methods—examining race and gender from a black feminist perspective that draws on biopolitics theory, as well as using close reading, affect theory, and attention to narrative in my textual analysis—establish my argument’s framework. By bringing these perspectives and methods together in my attention to the interplay between Darwinian discourse and American literature, I shed new light on the turn-of-the-century transatlantic exchange between science and culture and reveal how descent, understood as biological heredity, structures race and gender within a narrative of human progress.

The consequences of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution for concepts of the human can be summarized as the recognition that the human, as a category, is not a unique being of rationality, but is instead a hairless, highly intelligent ape, a member of materiality just as much as its animal relatives. At the same time, this recognition of the human as animal and as descending from arbitrary processes also generated anxiety over the diminished sense of human superiority and directed history. To grapple with the anxiety generated by Darwin’s radical concepts, the image of the human as animal was reconfigured via reinforcement of racializing and gendering procedures; the human was categorized in a hierarchy from the most animalistic and material, the black and/or feminine, to the least animalistic and most rational, the white and masculine. By mobilizing Darwin’s claims to position blackness as a mark of bestial prehistory and womanhood as a state of irrational materiality, subjects marked as white and/or masculine were able to channel the disquieting implications of evolutionary theory to othered bodies and maintain their sense of (narrowly defined) humanity as distinct from base animality.

Thus, the tension between the animal and the human implied by Darwinian theory shifted to racial boundary-making in which the physicality of living matter revealed its own positioning, via descent, within a hierarchy; simultaneously, this framework rendered women as biologically determined instruments for reproducing and maintaining this hierarchy. Science, practiced by white men in Europe and the United States, allowed the idea of race and gender as fixed, inherently inferior categories to circulate as fact and pervade cultural and literary texts. Widespread acceptance of these categories as biologically determined, and their epistemological basis in evolution, has prevailed in the West since the late nineteenth century and continues to resonate in the early twenty-first century.

The concept of descent in relation to biological life invokes ancestry and establishes the line of heredity from which the individual is born and to which he or she may contribute. Descent, as it is understood in our post-Darwinian context, is the organizing thread of biological organisms’ development through time. In addition to its evocation of heredity and lineage, “descent” can also refer to the act of falling downward. Together, the varied meanings of the word suggest descent as both stable and active, as a fixed product of time and as a fluctuating process of movement. Descent therefore constitutes a central concept in evolutionary theory’s inscription of life’s development and its temporal scheme. In descent, classification and change are suspended and uneasily unified. I analyze descent as a point of tension in the evolutionist scheme of race and gender: it secures human difference in a seemingly stable hierarchy, but at the same time, the mutability and relations underlying this hierarchy render it unsteady and fragile. Dominant categories of race and gender require regulation in order to forestall their descent into blurred categories and collapsed hierarchy. Along with my focus on descent as an overarching theme, I show how themes of human-animal kinship, the Western binary of rationality and materiality, and reproduction and maternity circulated within this discourse and contributed to the shape of modern evolutionist hierarchies of the human.

Indeed, the full titles of Darwin’s major texts point to the interplay between descent, time, reproduction, and categories of race and gender that I explore here. Darwin’s *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859) first popularized his theory of evolution via natural selection, while his *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) argued that humans, like animals, are the products of evolution and inquired into the development of human racial and gender differences. The title of the first text—with its inclusion of “origin,” “species,” and “races”—indicates the preoccupation with time and classification that impelled popular interest in evolution’s implications for human groups. Meanwhile, the title of the second text highlights the significance of “descent” in shaping turn-of-the-century understandings of human evolution and hierarchy; its reference to “sex” speaks to the significant role of gender difference in perpetuating human racial categories. Questions of human difference and humanity’s position within natural temporality drive Darwin’s arguments in these texts and contribute to his evolutionary logic of natural and sexual selection as forces of difference within his implied narrative of forward progressive development.

I examine evolution as a major influence on changes in late nineteenth-century epistemologies of the human and identify Darwin’s articulations of his ideas as key to the popular dissemination of evolutionary understandings of race and gender. This is not to claim that Darwin was the first articulator of evolutionary theory, nor that subsequent scientific discourse accepted these claims without question; indeed, the story is more complex than Darwin simply declaring “evolution” and others following. Nevertheless, Darwin’s texts were widely read and influential, and to this day, his name is synonymous with “evolution.” I pay attention to his works as crucial discursive texts in the popularization of evolutionary theory and as major forces in initiating subsequent evolutionary discourse. Therefore, when I refer to “evolutionary theory” or the “evolutionist paradigm,” I refer to Darwin’s ideas and the broader evolutionary discourse they instituted.

While I examine the discursive and literary effects of the evolutionist paradigm, the abundance of texts referring to Darwin or evolution, as well as the omnipresence of the evolutionist paradigm, necessarily means that textual responses—implicit or explicit—cannot be exhaustively addressed. In fact, recognizing the wide-ranging influence of evolutionary theory highlights the significance of delineating its effects on race and gender. Gillian Beer, in her analysis of Darwin’s influence on late nineteenth-century British literature, illustrates the pervasiveness of the evolutionist paradigm by comparing Darwin’s influence “on the generations which succeeded him” with that of Sigmund Freud’s:

We now live in a post-Freudian age: it is impossible, in our culture, to live a life which is not charged with Freudian assumptions, patterns for apprehending experience, ways of perceiving relationships, even if we have not read a word of Freud…Even those who…distrust [Freud’s views] find themselves unable to create a world cleansed of the Freudian. This was the nature also of Darwin’s influence…Everyone found themselves living in a Darwinian world in which old assumptions had ceased to *be* assumptions, could be at best beliefs, or myths. (3, emphasis original)

Beer’s analogy emphasizes how the evolutionist paradigm has become a feature of everyday experience, to such an extent that, even for those who may dispute this paradigm (such as Christian creationists), its influence is inescapable. Following the publication of Darwin’s texts and the late nineteenth-century dissemination of evolutionary theory, the evolutionist paradigm has become so deeply ingrained that it is almost invisible. By bringing this oft-implicit logic to light and focusing on literary texts published in the wake of evolutionary theory’s popularization, I aim to increase understanding of how evolutionist thought is used to justify sociocultural racial and gender oppression and how this justification might be challenged or reworked.

Recognizing this mutual exchange between scientific discourse and cultural texts thus allows consideration of how scientific claims become mechanisms for humans’ orienting themselves in the world and structuring reality. This orientation and structuring are achieved via language and, in part, concern themselves with cultural questions and formations, due to scientific claims’ meaning-laden potency. The necessity of linguistic framing yields slanted knowledge-making. Wai-Chee Dimock and Priscilla Wald, in discussing the interplay between literature and science, claim that “the very articulation of a scientific concept takes it away from the realm of nature into the realm of human speech, where it carries all the cultural baggage of humanity” (708). Scientific explanation does not consist of merely translating nature into a human framework of understanding, due to this “cultural baggage,” or weight of meanings and associations intrinsic to language. Therefore, it is necessary to further interrogate the unquestioned assumptions generated in the wake of Darwin’s works and the evolutionist paradigm. Importantly for my approach, George Levine proposes, “Literary studies of Darwin are and probably should be methodologically eclectic, significantly concerned with Darwin, his texts, their *historical* context, and where and how the theory, multiply interpreted, has had its cultural consequences, and they *should* attend…to the texture of Darwinian language” (“Reflections” 231-32, emphases original). Levine underlines the necessity of adopting a multifaceted, particularly literary and rhetorical approach to Darwin’s texts and their effects: these texts must be historically and culturally situated, and furthermore, the methods of literary analysis uncover the linguistic and narrative dimensions of Darwin’s articulations and their proliferations of meanings. I focus on how, in particular, evolutionism’s role in the modern biologization of human categories is a significant consequence of this proliferation of meanings. The deployment of the evolutionist paradigm to support hierarchies of the human constitutes a mutually reinforcing procedure for sustaining human typologies. Tracing how the evolutionist paradigm shaped the development—both unambiguous and latent—of ideologies of race and gender makes visible its persistent effects.

In addition to examining culture’s influence on Darwin’s texts, I analyze the evolutionist paradigm’s influence on literary texts. David Amigoni, in examining Darwinian thought from a humanities perspective, notes, “cultural analysis of the *Origin* must recognize that the text provoked cross-fertilization between endeavors of intellectual labor” (“Proliferation” 123); Amigoni’s metaphor of “cross-fertilization” illuminates how I consider the exchange between evolutionary discourse and literary works. In tracing evolutionist ideas in literary texts, I am mainly interested in how evolution forms the underlying framework of turn-of-the-century literature’s thematic concerns with the racialized and gendered dimensions of descent. In other words, while these texts occasionally make explicit references to evolution, I am more interested in their suggestive meanings and implicit ideas. In this, I am inspired by the approaches of Beer and several other scholars who have examined the influence of evolution and other scientific ideas on literature and culture. For instance, John Glendening, like Beer, analyzes the impact of evolution on Victorian novels, and states of the texts under his consideration, “Not only do they concern evolutionary complications, but the complexities and entanglements of evolutionary theory, interacting with multiple cultural influences, thoroughly permeate the narrative, descriptive, and thematic fabric of each” (32). Likewise, Alys Eve Weinbaum traces the concept of reproduction in cultural and literary texts and explains that she focuses more on these texts’ implicit “permeat[ion] by ideas” rather than on their explicit “manifest[ation]” of those ideas (6). I follow this idea of “permeation” and analyze the permeation of the evolutionist concept of descent and its effects on ideologies of race and gender in literary works by Larsen, Gilman, and Chopin.

My close reading of Darwin and analysis of the evolutionist paradigm’s permeation in literary texts clarifies the structure of my dissertation. In the first two chapters, to analyze Darwin’s evolutionist logic of race and gender via descent, I conduct close readings of his language and narrative. This establishes a clear foundation for my analysis of evolutionist themes of descent, race, and gender in novels and short stories by Larsen, Gilman, and Chopin. Situating these texts together shows the transatlantic resonances of Darwinian discourse and its particular effects on women and within the context of American racial hierarchy. I identify linear progress, with rationality at the apex, as the narrative structure supporting hierarchy and descent as the logic stabilizing race and gender categories. My analysis of Larsen’s, Gilman’s, and Chopin’s works in light of the evolutionist paradigm demonstrates the close entanglement of race and gender in the evolutionist scheme and how these effects differ across racial lines.

I place these writers’ works in conversation with evolutionist discourse for several reasons. First, considering the evolutionist paradigm in the context of the turn-of-the-century United States helps to clarify how the humanity of racialized and gendered subjects was a topic of heated debate in the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction, as increasing numbers of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants arrived in the US, and as women advocated for equal rights. Regarding this American context, historian Gail Bederman explains that, at the turn of the century, “hegemonic discourses of civilization” were used to consolidate masculine white supremacy through the rationale that “white male bodies had evolved through centuries of Darwinistic survival of the fittest” (42). Moreover, according to historian Kimberly Hamlin, who examines evolutionist thought’s influence on American first-wave feminism, “in democratic governments founded on the principle of ‘natural rights,’ the political world is supposed to mirror the natural, so what people accept as evidence from nature shapes political, cultural, and personal realities,” and in the late nineteenth century, evolutionary theory was a major influence in these debates (5). Therefore, the particularities of the American context—its history of racial oppression and resistance, turn-of-the-century white nativist trends, and contestations over its founding ideology of “natural rights”—mean that the evolutionist paradigm’s figuring of the human was especially consequential in offering new ways to understand the significance of racial and gender difference. While several literary critics have examined evolutionary theory in relation to British literature, its influences on American literature remain under-examined, as I briefly detail below.

Following this, the second reason why I place these writers in conversation with Darwin is due to the unique vantage points they offer as women writers, which is important for my application of a feminist perspective to analyzing evolutionist discourse. As writers whose embodiment renders them inferior in the evolutionist hierarchy that I delineate in Chapters 1 and 2, Larsen, Gilman, and Chopin offer responses that reveal this hierarchy’s varied effects on racialized and gendered bodies. Although Chopin’s and Gilman’s works were published earlier, I first examine Larsen’s work in Chapter 3 because her focus on black women reveals the force of the evolutionist paradigm in situating race and gender together as marks of inferiority. This focus on Larsen, in turn, establishes a frame of reference for considering how Gilman’s and Chopin’s works suggest evolution’s quite different effects for white women. Gilman’s work, in particular, demonstrates how some turn-of-the-century white feminists viewed evolutionary theory as a means of arguing for white women’s equality with white men. Finally, these writers’ consciousness of Darwinian discourse is documented, which supports my analysis of the resonances of the evolutionist paradigm in their work.[[1]](#footnote-1) As I explain in Chapter 3, Larsen wrote during a period when eugenics and anti-miscegenation discourse were widely disseminated and ideas of black people as “primitive” pervaded modernist aesthetics. In fact, Larsen’s work as a nurse exposed her to eugenicist thought’s influence on medical practice, as shown by George Hutchinson’s biography. I establish this context in Chapter 3 to show how the evolutionist paradigm of descent rooted these discourses and to thus analyze how these are interrogated by Larsen’s novel *Quicksand*. Gilman and Chopin, meanwhile, are both documented readers of Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, and Herbert Spencer, as I detail in Chapter 4. Indeed, Gilman’s prolific nonfiction writings demonstrate her engagement with evolutionist ideas.[[2]](#footnote-2)

My analysis of the evolutionist paradigm’s permeation of these American women writers’ literary works thus proceeds from my identification of this paradigm as a major influence on turn-of-the-century transatlantic ideologies of race and gender. Placing Darwin and these writers together shows that evolutionism forms the background of turn-of-the-century ideas of gender, race, and reproduction, with descent the backbone. Race, gender, and sexuality build upon each other, but also reverberate differently, through the evolutionist timeline of progress and separate branches of racialized descent. I argue that the nineteenth-century evolutionist account of the development of organic life via natural selection revealed the fluctuating kinship of all lifeforms, including humans. These fluctuating kinship relations were restructured by turn-of-the-century biological and anthropological discourses that mobilized this evolutionist account as evidence for racial and gender hierarchy, in which human difference becomes a sign of one’s inherent superiority or inferiority. In this scheme, the concept of descent, in particular, functions as the vehicle for preserving and displaying biological categories of race and gender. Alongside the increasing attention to the visual in scientific and popular discourse at the turn of the century, the evolutionist concept of descent stabilized the potential chaos of kinship into concrete categories and rendered feminine embodiment as instrumental in perpetuating these categories.

In framing my discussion of the evolutionist paradigm of race and gender, I need to clarify several terms, especially the context of how their usage at the turn of the century differs from their current usage. It is important to stress that, while I examine how race and gender hierarchies were culturally constructed as biological facts, Darwin and turn-of-the-century writers did not conceptualize a divide between biology and culture in constituting identity. In fact, they saw biology alone as determining identity, and culture as intrinsic to this biology. In his critical analysis of the turn-of-the-century concept of race, George W. Stocking explains that at this time, “‘Blood’—and by extension ‘race’—included numerous elements that we would today call cultural; there was not a clear line between cultural and physical elements or between social and biological heredity” (“Turn-of-the-Century” 6). A similar conflation of the biological and the cultural was in use for gender, as Cynthia Eagle Russett explains in her history of sexual science: “the study of society was seen as a kind of extension of biology to be pursued according to the methods and concepts of the natural sciences” (86). Russett continues, “Darwin shared this general disposition to treat mind and culture in biological terms” (87). Understanding the period’s view of culture or mind as inhering in biology thus illuminates how white masculine scientists demarcated women and people of color as innately inferior.

Furthermore, this introduction warrants a brief explanation of how I use the terms “race” and “gender.” As the full title of Darwin’s *Origin*, above, suggests, “race” can refer to species (e.g., the human race) or to distinctly marked groups within humanity. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this latter usage originated from a fifteenth-century French word denoting a “group of people connected by common descent” (“Race”), which is quite evocative for my analysis of descent’s role in evolutionist hierarchies of the human. Darwin and the other writers I examine use both meanings of the word “race”; I consider the context of their usage, while also noting that this word’s varying meanings produce suggestive connections between the concepts of species and human races. Meanwhile, the current feminist distinction between “sex” as biological and “gender” as cultural was not in use during the period under examination.[[3]](#footnote-3) The usage of “gender” to denote a sociocultural phenomenon came into practice in the mid twentieth century (“Gender,” *OED)*. The writers under consideration, following their period’s conflation of biology and culture, use “sex” to refer to male or female identity. For the purpose of clarity, in my textual analysis, I use “sex” to refer to biology and “gender” to refer to womanhood as a cultural category, while contextualizing, where necessary, how the writers understood these terms.

To further situate the context of evolutionary theory, Darwin’s texts—and the subsequent human sciences they inspired—were strongly influenced by historical developments of modernity. In showing why I place Darwin’s texts in conversation with American literature, I have explained why evolutionist concepts of race and gender were subjects of intense interest in the turn-of-the-century United States. I show in Chapters 1 and 2 that, despite suggestions of nonlinearity, Darwinian evolution’s implied language of rational agency and narrative of linear progress established a paradigm in which people of color, especially black people, and women are positioned as less-developed and hence less civilized. This paradigm must be placed in the context of colonial expansion and the ideology of modern progress. Darwin himself, of course, traveled to South America before writing the *Origin* and thereby participated in the colonial enterprise. His ideas themselves cannot be disentangled from the context of colonialism: as Amigoni notes, “In practice, scientific theories of life, particularly Charles Darwin’s emerging species theory, advanced by drawing on a multiplicity of sources,” which “include[d] complex encounters with the practice of colonialism on the one hand, and ‘primitive’ people on the other” (*Colonies* 83). As I will show in Chapters 2 and 3, this idea of the non-white races as “primitive” is implied by Darwin’s elaboration of human evolution as a narrative of progress toward higher, “civilized” humanity. Colonial encounters thus made more immediate the question of discovering the origins of human races and delineating their categories. Urmila Seshagiri explains, “as exploration, trade, and imperial conquest brought Europeans into contact with more and more of the world’s peoples, physical variation presented itself in an incredible range of skin color, hair texture, smell, and skull size that demanded scientific explanation” (17). These encounters made human variety more palpable for Europeans and this awareness drove the questions of origins and difference that engaged natural historians and evolutionists.

Therefore, transatlantic grappling with race—European colonization and the American aftermath of the Civil War—forms the background to the evolutionist paradigm of race as a state of lesser development. Women were similarly viewed as less developed, and I analyze the evolutionist positioning of race and gender in Chapter 2. This scientific positioning of women as less developed and intelligent than men occurred in response to the nascent women’s movement on both sides of the Atlantic. For instance, Rita Felski notes, “As part of the prevailing intellectual currency of the time, evolutionary theories were regularly invoked to justify the necessity of women’s place within the domestic sphere” as according to this logic, women “needed to conserve their energy for their vital role as mothers” (155). Similarly, Russett observes that late nineteenth-century Anglo-American scientists “responded to this unrest [feminism] with a detailed and sustained examination of the differences between men and women that justified their differing social roles” (10). To suppress growing anxieties of race and gender, then, the evolutionist paradigm was mobilized as a means of naturalizing and fortifying human hierarchy. According to this paradigm, race and gender both marked lower states of progress, and thus, as Sander Gilman has shown, black women were circumscribed as the ultimate embodiment of the primitive (83-93), an image which I explore in Chapter 3. To further deepen understanding of this logic, I unpack how Darwin’s language and narrative, intentionally or not, rendered evolutionary theory amenable to the turn-of-the-century ideology of white masculinity as the apex of human progress.

The assumption that nonwhite people and women are in a state of arrested development proceeds from the narrativizing of evolution as the gradual change from crude, or supposedly lower, organic forms toward higher, or more refined, forms. In this view, recent or contemporaneous beings are superior by virtue of their novelty. This understanding of the modern as “higher” and more civilized mirrors the post-Enlightenment idea of disembodied rationality, understood as masculine, as superior to and mastering base materiality, understood as feminine.[[4]](#footnote-4) The evolutionist paradigm emerged from this ideology of modern progress and rational mastery. Chandan Reddy explains the suggestions relayed by the “modern” designation,

Shaped by its relation to other terms such as “progress,” “development,” “freedom,” “revolution,” “society,” and “civilization,” “modern” was no longer a mere temporal descriptor. Instead, it signified a “newness” previously unavailable in human consciousness and societies, a distinctive orientation of thought toward the future rather than tradition, and a uniquely “scientific” worldview that located Europe as a coherent geography and temporal center of global history. (43)

The nineteenth century conceived Europe, or the West more generally, as the “temporal center of global history” due to its modern status, its successful attainment of “civilization” and revolution away from older ways of being. “Premodern” ways of being were not civilized because they remained traditional and lacked modern technology or industry—in other words, anything designated as premodern was, by definition, uncivilized. In this view, if the modern West constituted an advanced civilization distinguished by science and rationality, then groups of people who were considered “uncivilized” or irrational lacked development, and according to science, were less evolved. Associations between modern status, skin color, sexual embodiment, and evolutionary progress became mutually entangled and self-referencing. Regarding this concept of modernity, Felski states, “the idea of progress symbolizes this institutionalization of the new… Western evolutionary narratives thus reveal an ossification of the dynamics of change into a rigid and prescriptive model of historical development” (170). Situating the evolutionist paradigm within its historical context of modernity therefore clarifies how its scientific claims became a resource for justifying hierarchy as biologically determined. As Felski points out, the idea of “change” in evolution was glossed over as its temporal structure was affixed to modern ideology of linear progressive development.

I argue that close attention to the implicit suggestions in Darwin’s account of evolution and of the development of racial and gender differences reveals how the concept of descent was used to organize evolutionary flux into a coherent structure. This structuring of race and gender can be traced in the literary texts I examine, which both challenge and accept this paradigm. By placing Darwin’s discourse in conversation with literary texts, my analysis therefore contributes to, and extends, scholarship that approaches Darwin and evolution from the perspective of literary and cultural studies. In particular, I contribute to this conversation by drawing attention to, and analyzing, the specific features of grammatical agency, affective language, and narrative structure of Darwin’s work.

Previous scholarship that analyzes Darwin’s work and its ramifications from a humanities perspective typically takes several main emphases. More recently, several scholars have examined how evolutionary and scientific ideology pervades literary representations of the human. More often, however, scholarship in the humanities has taken several other approaches to Darwin’s work. First, many have focused on Darwin’s biography and the historical conditions of his authorship, including tracing the genealogy of the idea of evolution in European science;[[5]](#footnote-5) another kind of genealogy is undertaken in comparing Darwin’s articulation of the development of species to nineteenth-century philology’s study of the development of languages.[[6]](#footnote-6) Moreover, humanistic approaches to Darwinism focus on its metaphysical implications, particularly in terms of religious belief.[[7]](#footnote-7)

While most of the above approaches are too far afield from my focus on hierarchies of the human, analyses that focus on Darwin’s use of language and narrative provide useful models and support my examination of his texts’ discursive effects. Several critics and essay collections focus on analyzing evolutionary discourse and connecting it to literary works. Most of these critics—including Beer, Levine, Amigoni, Glendening, and Virginia Richter—relate evolutionary theory to Victorian literature and culture.[[8]](#footnote-8) In addition, a handful of collections[[9]](#footnote-9) and one monograph, *The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871-1926* by Bert Bender, have examined Darwin’s influence on transatlantic and American literature and culture. These scholars have established the importance of considering evolutionary theory alongside cultural texts. However, the lack of attention to American literature, compared to Victorian literature, in light of evolutionist discourse demonstrates that this exchange warrants further extended investigation. Bender’s book is a wide-ranging examination of how sexual selection theory influenced American literary representations of sexuality, courtship, and marriage. In particular, his attention to Chopin’s engagement with evolution provides important support for my analysis. However, while Bender shows the importance of putting American literature in conversation with evolutionary theory, his work leaves much room for furthering this connection, especially since his approach largely lacks the insights of feminist and critical race theories. Through my analysis of Larsen’s, Gilman’s, and Chopin’s works, I show how the evolutionist paradigm of descent shaped turn-of-the-century ideologies of race and gender and how, in this paradigm, race and gender are both yoked together and distinctly constituted.

In using the lens of literary and cultural studies to analyze how modern biological understandings of human embodiment affect gendered and racialized subjects, I follow the examples of several recent scholars. The scholarship of Alys Eve Weinbaum, Laura Doyle, Dana Seitler, and Venla Oikkonen demonstrates in various ways the fruitfulness of considering, from a feminist viewpoint, how scientific concepts of the human pervade literary and cultural texts. Weinbaum and Doyle focus on the significance of reproduction and maternity in, respectively, transatlantic and American literature and culture. Both focus on how ideologies of reproduction help to structure the racial color line: Weinbaum calls this the “race/reproduction bind” (5), while Doyle identifies this as the “racialized maternal complex, or race matrix, of modern Western culture” (4). Weinbaum’s and Doyle’s analyses illuminate my examination of the evolutionist narrative of descent and its racialized and gendered reverberations in literature. Seitler and Oikkonen, meanwhile, analyze scientific discourse alongside cultural texts in two distinct contexts, highlighting the rich exchange between these modes and exploring some themes that I also address. Seitler focuses on the idea of atavism, which she describes as the threat of “a resurgence of the prehuman past” (24), in turn-of-the-century literature and culture, thereby engaging with concepts of human-animal kinship and modern progress. Oikkonen examines the significance of contemporary evolutionist discourses, such as sociobiology and genetics, and shows how these discourses affect contemporary gender and racial hierarchy.[[10]](#footnote-10) These scholars therefore provide enlightening models, as well as valuable support, for my analysis of Darwin’s texts together with literary texts by women. Moreover, their deployment of feminist and critical race theories demonstrates how this orientation enables critical analysis of scientific discourse and offers means for rethinking it. In fact, some feminist theories, such as Elizabeth Grosz, have recently highlighted how attention to evolutionary theory and materiality can allow new feminist perspectives.[[11]](#footnote-11) Exploring the connections between evolutionary theory and modern concepts of gender and race, then, is a fertile, revealing subject of concern. I contribute to this conversation by showing the significance of examining Darwinian discourse alongside American literature by women writers, an association in need of deeper scholarly attention, especially from a feminist, theoretical perspective.

Indeed, I use feminist and theoretical methods to support and deepen my analysis of the evolutionist structuring of race and gender. I draw upon black feminist and biopolitics theories in my scrutiny of race and gender in the texts under consideration. I follow Ladelle McWhorter’s suggestion that attention to biology’s organization of the human into normative categories clarifies the modern construction of race and sex as measures of superiority or inferiority (50). As McWhorter explains, biopolitics theory allows us to understand that “in present-day discourse and institutions, race and sex intersect primarily at points where people think in terms of normality and abnormality or deviance, where people have major managerial goals for large populations, and where there is a strong desire to control human development” (54). I use my close reading of Darwin and trace the evolutionist paradigm in literary texts in order to reveal how this intersection of race and sex is aligned and fortified and how it affects racialized and gendered subjects. In addition, Alexander G. Weheliye’s integration of biopolitics theories with the works of black feminist theorists Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter is especially instructive. Through this analysis, Weheliye highlights how racial and gender categories are intrinsic to the modern concept of the human as biological entity.

Following this, the black feminist perspective that structures of race and gender must be considered together informs my analysis of how the evolutionist paradigm affects black and white women in distinct ways. The importance of considering race as a key part of a feminist perspective is shown by the Combahee River Collective’s statement of black feminism: we “find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression that is neither solely racial nor solely sexual” (5-6). The black feminist perspective is especially important for my analysis of evolution, as the evolutionist paradigm’s conception of both racialized groups and women as undeveloped makes it potentially easy to consider race and gender as parallels. However, as I will show in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, the evolutionist concept of descent has distinct consequences for race and gender; Larsen’s work demonstrates the unique ways these consequences bear upon black women, while Gilman’s reveals how some white women used racism to advance feminist interests.

Furthermore, my analysis of the latent meaning in Darwin’s language and narrative employs affect and narrative theories. Sara Ahmed’s concept of “affective objects” and Mel Y. Chen’s concept of “animacies” enable understanding of how emotions, associations, and agency proliferate from language. These theories support my argument that, even when the connotations of Darwin’s articulations are unintentional or unavoidably necessary, his articulations are sedimented with suggestions of linear progress and human hierarchy. Chen’s animacies—briefly, the idea that language codes oppressed subjects as less animate or agential—especially sheds light on how the evolutionist paradigm figures racialized and gendered subjects as less rational and hence less developed, which I elaborate in Chapters 1 and 2.

In addition, I consider narrative structure an important aspect of Darwin’s, Larsen’s, Gilman’s, and Chopin’s works, as the linearity of narrative helps to construct evolution as a narrative of progress, which indicates that nonlinearity may challenge this narrative. In this regard, Oikkonen’s attention to narrative in her feminist analyses of scientific discourse is particularly instructive. Oikkonen’s claim that we can “understand narrative as an implicit logic that organizes text and images” (“Narrative” 298) illuminates how narrative organizes Darwin’s theory of evolution into comprehensible logic. Following Oikkonen, I argue that narrative itself structures ideology, a claim also supported by Judith Roof’s statement that “narrative is the informing logic by which individuality, identity, and ideology merge into a cooperative and apparently unified vision of the truths of existence” (xv). Accordingly, I use Roof, along with Peter Brooks, to examine Darwin’s narrative logic of evolution and its reverberations in the narratives of Larsen, Gilman, and Chopin. Roof and Brooks may be considered outliers in the framework of my dissertation, as their concerns with psychoanalysis are outside the boundaries of my focus; however, my analysis of narrative is substantiated by their claims, and consideration of psychoanalytic narrative theory in this context may warrant further attention in the future.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This dissertation, therefore, begins with my application of literary analysis and close reading to Darwin’s major texts in order to uncover how they formed a suggestive foundation for late nineteenth to early twentieth century ideologies of race and gender. I use this analysis as the key background for my close investigation of the evolutionist paradigm’s influence on the manifold visions of race and gender in Larsen’s, Gilman’s, and Chopin’s literary texts.

In Chapter 1, “Animating Material Hierarchy: The Implied Agency of Natural Selection in Darwin,” I conduct a close reading of Darwin’s articulation of natural selection in *The Origin of Species*. To frame this analysis, I consider how scientific language is imbued with affect and cultural assumptions, using Ahmed, Chen, Bruno Latour, and others for support. I focus on how Darwin’s syntactical and narrative structure imply evolution as an agential force aimed at linear progress. In the context of the nineteenth-century modern West, these implications contributed to the popular view of white masculinity as the teleological endpoint of evolution. I note, however, that ideas of flux and interdependence are also embedded in Darwin’s theory, which, as Grosz shows, suggest possibilities for reconceiving of evolution as supporting feminist aims.

In Chapter 2, “The Visual Taxonomy and Material Instruments of Descent: Evolutionist Scales of Race and Gender,” I analyze Darwin’s articulation of the development of race and gender differences in *The Descent of Man*. I also examine Thomas Henry Huxley’s *Evidence as to Man’s Place in Nature*, as this mid nineteenth century text strongly influenced Darwin’s account of human evolution. I argue that Darwin’s and Huxley’s accounts suggest how anxiety over animal-human kinship can be alleviated through structuring nonwhite races and women as less developed and hence inferior. While other scholars have addressed this anxiety, I add to this discussion by focusing on descent as a central idea in structuring this hierarchy. I draw attention to the mono-polygenesis debate—the scientific argument over whether or not the human races share a common ancestor—to show the significance of descent. Evolution’s suggestion of slippage between categories was tenuously stabilized in the idea of descent as a visually comprehensible mark of classification. In addition, I show how the same evolutionist logic of irrational underdevelopment classified women as inferior and analyze how this was influenced by Darwin’s articulation of the “sexual selection” concept. The evolutionist paradigm circumscribed reproduction and maternity as instruments in the perpetuation of racialized descent, which meant that the consequences of this logic were quite different for white and black women. My attention to descent as a key theme shows the overlap and divergences between the evolutionist paradigm of race and gender as signs of inferiority.

In Chapter 3, “The Instability of Visible Descent and Racialized Reproduction: The Biopolitical Subject in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*,” I argue that Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* interrogates and complicates aesthetic primitivism and biopolitical racism and sexism, both rooted in evolutionist discourses. In this way, I contribute to scholarly discussion of this text’s challenge to primitivist objectification of the black feminine body and relate this discussion to the evolutionist paradigm’s transatlantic effects. Scholarship on *Quicksand* has attended only briefly (if at all) to the novel’s ending and Helga’s ruinous maternity, as I elaborate in the chapter. In my analysis, I focus on this ending as a key aspect of the novel, overlapping with its other themes. I argue that through depicting Helga’s conflicted attitude toward motherhood, Larsen’s text shows how black women are objectified as propagators of inferior descent. Dorothy Roberts’ work on the American history of black women’s experiences of reproductive injustice provides crucial context. *Quicksand* demonstrates the centrality of descent and maternity in the evolutionist scheme of race and gender. Larsen’s text shows that these forces harm Helga, but also hints at the fragile logic underlying the evolutionist scheme.

In Chapter 4, “Exonerating the Snake: Maternal Cultivation in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* and Grounded Descent in Kate Chopin’s Short Stories,” I focus on Gilman’s utopian novel *Herland* (1915) and Chopin’s short stories as revealing examples of the different ways white woman writers engaged with evolution at the turn of the century. I first contextualize this literary analysis by explaining how, despite its claims of women’s lower intelligence and inferiority, evolutionary theory was welcomed by first-wave white feminists. As Hamlin and others detail, these feminists viewed evolutionary theory as a potential means of challenging the Christian basis of sexism, and Gilman was one such feminist. As I detail in the chapter, I join recent literary critics and historians who have drawn attention to racial hierarchy as a troubling aspect of Gilman’s feminism. While I acknowledge the feminist innovations of *Herland*, I argue that the novel’s overwhelming emphasis on pure (in other words, white) descent and maternal regulation constitutes an endorsement of eugenic utopia, an aspect which needs more attention. I highlight *Herland*’s recurring images of plant and animal cultivation as central to Gilman’s eugenic feminism. The significance of this cultivation imagery has not received scholarly attention, and I thus bring this into focus to show that Gilman, by presenting cultivation and controlled reproduction as utopian ideals, ultimately supports a hegemonic view of evolution as a narrative of linear progress toward whiteness. Following this analysis, I examine themes of descent, sexuality, and reproduction in two Kate Chopin short stories. I focus on “The Bênitous’ Slave” and “La Belle Zoraïde” (both published in the collection *Bayou Folk*, 1894), two stories which have received little scholarly attention, but are revealing in the ways they present racial hierarchy as determined by descent yet also delicately constituted. The themes in “La Belle Zoraïde” echo those of Chopin’s much-studied story “Désirée’s Baby” in interesting ways, and so I draw attention to this story as another example of Chopin’s ambiguous engagement with how racial descent and maternity affect mulatta women. While Gilman unambiguously advocates for a desexualized white matriarchy, Chopin’s stories waver between support for, and critique of, racial hierarchy. Chopin’s stories also embrace sexuality as an extension of humans’ relations with untamed nature. My attention to the theme of descent in Chopin’s stories, especially in relation to race and maternity, may illuminate these themes in her other works.

Reading Larsen, Gilman, and Chopin together against the backdrop of white masculine evolutionist theory reveals how this theory roots women as materially bound reproducers of the evolutionist narrative of superior whiteness and inferior blackness. As evolutionist discourse permeated turn-of-the-century understandings of the human body, these women writers’ texts show the close entanglement of race and gender in this scheme and the resonating, diverging effects of biopolitical regulation of the feminine body.

# CHAPTER 1. ANIMATING MATERIAL HIERARCHY: THE IMPLIED AGENCY OF NATURAL SELECTION IN DARWIN

In cultural studies, Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory is often read as either challenging conventional hierarchy and embracing flux, or on the other hand, as reinforcing dominant Western ideologies of racial and gender oppression. This tension between radicalism and hegemony pervades Darwin’s influential *On the Origin of Species*. In this chapter, I conduct close reading of key passages from the *Origin* in order to highlight this text’s implied agency of natural selection and linear narrative of evolutionary progress. I argue that these features allowed dominant nineteenth-century scientific discourse to consolidate evolution’s proliferations into a stable hierarchy. I therefore show how Darwin’s claims became amenable for subsequent evolutionary discourses, whether scholarly and professional or popular, to mobilize evolution as justifying racial and gender hierarchies. I begin by discussing the importance of reading Darwin’s work in terms of its language and cultural context and of recognizing how scientific claims become infused with cultural meaning. Following this, I analyze how Darwin’s explication of natural selection, due to the constraints of English syntax, implies a hidden force behind evolutionary progress. Similarly, Darwin’s description of evolutionary development from simple to complex forms takes shape as narrative. I link these suggestions of agency and narrative in the *Origin* and explain that they are significant because they provide a framework for popular late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century understandings of evolution as a story in which a higher force directs organic life toward its presumed apex, white masculinity.

Darwin proposes natural selection as the vehicle driving the evolution of species over time. The conventions of English grammar limited Darwin’s ability to explain natural selection as an impersonal process, which clarifies how this text suggests natural selection as an agential force underlying material development. Moreover, analyzing these suggestions of agency along with Darwin’s narrative construction, in which evolution is elaborated as a teleological narrative directed toward white masculinity—the assumed apex of organic life—demonstrates how evolution was mobilized as a rationale for oppressive classifications of the human. Although Darwin’s explication of natural selection wavers between linearity and flux, its grammatical and narrative construction invites readings of natural selection as an agent directing progress toward white, masculine European civilization. I deploy Mel Y. Chen’s concept of animacies to illuminate how this natural process becomes personified, and furthermore, how this personification renders certain human groups as more or less “animate” than others. Therefore, my reading of grammar and narrative in Darwin’s articulation of natural selection demonstrates how cultural discourse mobilizes this scientific concept as a personified agent of dominant white masculinity, and more broadly, emphasizes the difficulty of considering non-human material processes from our anthropocentric frame of reference.

Addressing humanity’s current position in history, and consequently, its status as animal life, was necessarily part of the attempt to understand evolution. This concern with historical development became manifest in explanations that hinged on racialized and gendered difference. The narrative positioning of humanity in Darwinian evolution wavers between arbitrary randomness and traditional resolution. As the account of man’s descent from lower animals casts doubt on his exceptionality, so popular understandings of this descent rearticulate Darwin’s explication of material processes and his tentative genealogy into a teleological narrative of progress. Thus, as Darwin’s major textual arguments appeared on the nineteenth-century Western stage, their fundamental emphasis on instability was veiled by scientific and popular responses which mobilized the evolutionary account of the formation of difference as a linear narrative that rationalized the preservation (indeed, fortification) of racialized and gendered hierarchies. Following the suggestions of Darwin’s language and narrative, evolutionist discourse was deployed as evidence for “race” as biological fact and sexed embodiment as bound to gendered reproductive functions. Darwin’s explication of natural selection, in particular, reveals the tension between randomness, or flux, and direction, or linearity, intrinsic to his argument. The tension between randomness and hierarchy at the core of the evolutionary story parallels the tension between forces of rapid, unpredictable change and dominant ideologies of rational, civilized progress I discussed in my Introduction.

## Reading Darwin in the Context of Language and Culture

I intervene in literary-studies approaches to Darwin by focusing on Darwin’s major texts, the *Origin of Species* (1859) and the *Descent of Man* (1871) and analyzing how these texts’ linguistic and narrative evocations account for subsequent appropriations in cultural discourse. I show how these narrative and linguistic elements highlight the potential instability of meanings embedded in Darwin’s claims. Tracing how scientific concepts are articulated via language and narrative enables deeper analysis of how the dominant evolutionist paradigm figured racialized and gendered bodies as biologically inferior and the permeation of this ideology in literature and culture.

The publication of *The Origin* elicited a flurry of intellectual discourse, most immediately in Victorian natural science. More broadly, in the late nineteenth-century West, Darwin’s ideas influenced the burgeoning fields of biology and anthropology and their delineations of the constitution, and meaning, of racial and gender categories. Scholars have shown how Darwin’s texts played a significant role in the development of these academic disciplines and their concomitant cultural attitudes. Donna J. Haraway critiques the discipline of primatology and how primate behavior is sometimes assumed to explain human society. According to Haraway, the mid twentieth-century “biological sciences’ focus on monkeys and apes has sought to make visible both the form and the history of our personal and social bodies” and so “the issue rests on our skill in the construction of mirrors” (*Simians* 21).[[13]](#footnote-13) The evolutionist paradigm, via its positioning of humanity within the advancement of natural history, has inspired efforts to “make visible” truths about humanity that are assumed to be hidden in nature. Haraway draws our attention to how this “construction of mirrors,” or seeking of corresponding reflections between nature and culture (an assumption already fraught with dualisms), becomes an “issue” when this effort is embedded within already existing human power structures because, as she states, “nature is…constituted historically, not discovered naked in a fossil bed or tropical forest” (*Simians* 106).

Certainly, the view that Darwin’s *Origin* initiated a radical break from traditional notions of a chain of being populated with stable organisms and thus toward increased secularization is now a truism. The view of Darwin as initiating a “revolution” in thought is, of course, oversimplified, because, as Beer explains the concept of evolution had been a subject of debate and proposed in other forms by scientists for years before the *Origin* (11). Regarding such frameworks of scientific history, Bruno Latour observes, “the modern conception of time, as it is embedded into the discipline of history, depends—strangely enough—on a certain conception of science that suppresses the ins and outs of Nature’s objects and presents their sudden emergence as if it were miraculous” (70). This “conception of science” is related to a history of nature (i.e., of scientific objects) “dealing with universal and necessary things that have always been present, lacking any historicity but that of total revolutions or epistemological breaks” (71). Latour connects the view of science as a series of revolutions to the modern period’s broader conception of history (or temporality) and its situating of nature as consisting of scientific objects awaiting discovery. Latour shows how the modern period’s fashioning of its own history intersects with the increased importance of science, which together position scientific discoveries as “miraculous” or as “epistemological breaks,” in other words, as decisive moments in which the “universality” of nature—or its inherent truth—is revealed to the human scientist. In this way, the divide between human culture and natural objects remains in place via the consciousness of modern history as the gradual increase of comprehending nature. Latour’s analysis illuminates why Darwin’s *Origin* is regarded as revolutionary and, moreover, why it occupied a key position in nineteenth-century discourse about nature and the human.

Thus, while the popular understanding of Darwin as initiating a revolution or “discovering” evolution glosses over the scientific context to which his claims responded, it is nevertheless a useful way of approaching the evolutionist paradigm because this is the manner in which his ideas are so widely understood. Moreover, the very confluence of the idea of modernity as a series of breaks with the idea of nature as an object to be discovered that Latour identifies is key to understanding why evolutionary theory was so momentous at the time and how it has been mobilized. The question of humanity’s position within evolution hinges on the issues of temporal progress and of nature as self-revealing; natural selection and sexual selection, which drive evolution, suggest multifarious conclusions regarding these questions and issues and thus accumulate power in discursive racializing and gendering procedures.

## Darwin’s Modern Anxieties and Orientations

Darwin’s explanation of the development of organic life via natural selection was a decisive challenge to traditional confidence in man’s superior position in nature and the assumed stability of all lifeforms and their collective cosmology. Rather than an enduring taxonomy of a distinct hierarchy of beings, Darwin’s articulation of the development of species over time revealed the uncertainty of these beings’ positions in a broader order and their susceptibility to the modifying influence of a web of conditions. Darwin describes this reconfigured schema as “the affinities of all organic beings” and declares, “It is a truly wonderful fact—the wonder of which we are apt to overlook from familiarity—that all animals and all plants throughout all time and space should be related to each other in group subordinate to group, in the manner which we everywhere behold” (*OS* 134). Darwin’s description of “all…beings” as sharing “affinities” is innovative in its suggestion of unstable categories, as the potential overlap between different organisms means that a fixed hierarchy—and the secure distinction between humans and animals—can no longer be assured. Darwin proposes that a fundamental slippage underlies natural categories. Jeff Wallace argues that the then-radical implications of Darwin’s ideas should not be understated and claims, “Half a century before an illustrious successor whose new physics became synonymous with the moment of cultural modernism, Darwin produced in the *Origin* a general theory of relativity” and that Darwin’s attention to variety constitutes “the anti-essentialism which has been seen as the *Origin*’s fundamental challenge to Western metaphysics” (40). Indeed, Darwin’s rearticulation of the taxonomy of organic beings into an interrelated process of organic life constituted a move from fixed essences to “anti-essentialism”; the stable grid became a fluctuating scale. Wallace’s identifying this move as proposing a “general theory of relativity” draws attention to how Darwin’s focus on “affinities” is not only significant for its revelation of connections, but also for the fundamental sense of inconstancy underlying these gradually shifting connections. Human superiority is thrown into question because our organic constitution means that we exist relative to other beings and cannot rely on maintaining our position. Moreover, Darwin’s argument is stunning for its act of making the familiar strange: in the above quotation, he notes that, while these affinities are easy to “behold,” we can miss them because we are “apt to overlook from familiarity.” According to Darwin, the evidence supporting natural selection is readily available, and to perceive this fluctuating interrelation, a fresh perspective untethered from “familiarity” must be used. By directing the reader to comprehend the familiar from the vantage of a new ontology, Darwin produces potentially uncanny effects.

This uncanny reconfiguration of life’s relations was, in the nineteenth century, especially anxiety-generating in terms of its meaning for the human. Darwin’s *Origin* only *implied* this meaning, as it concerned the process of natural selection more generally. However, in *The Descent of Man*, Darwin makes explicit that human beings, specifically, are subject to this same process, as he states, “Man must be included with other organic beings in any general conclusion respecting his manner of appearance on this earth” (175). This refusal to grant exceptionality to “man” profoundly challenged traditional assumptions. Beer notes that Darwinian theory “foregrounds the concept of kin—and aroused many of the same dreads as fairy-tale in its insistence on the obligations of kinship, and the interdependence between beauty and beast” (7). By comparing Darwin’s effects to those of fairy tales, Beer highlights the primal anxieties his theory provokes—especially so during a period of sociocultural upheaval—and points out that evolutionism not only displaced man’s exceptionality, but also placed novel emphasis on “kinship,” that is, the realization that humans and animals share more than was conventionally assumed. In other words, according to Darwin, humans have emerged from the long line of animal descent. Darwin’s *Descent* and many responses to his work were largely preoccupied with delineating this relationship between humans and animals; consequently, the anxiety provoked by this affinity resulted in a racial hierarchy based on presumed degrees of animality. As Beer’s reference to “beauty and beast” implies, the evolutionist rendering of organic kinship was also consequential for gendered categories.

This reappropriation of the evolutionist paradigm thus assuaged the uncanny effects of Darwinian theory and even allowed for the fortification of normative scales of the human. Despite the radical potential of Darwin’s claims, the circulation of evolutionist ideas harbors profound tensions generated by the unavoidable imprecision of language. Evolutionist ideas can shift between ontologies of relativity and stability, depending on the mobilization, a vacillation intrinsic to nineteenth-century European modernity itself. The idea that reason itself is the distinguishing faculty of man and accordingly, the assumption that reason is a distinctly valuable trait, were both undermined by evolutionary theory and cultural modernism. Like Wallace above, James Rachels emphasizes the overriding fact of organic mutability as one of the key effects of the Darwinian argument, claiming, “Darwin argued that there are no fixed essences; there is only a multitude of organisms that resemble one another in some ways but differ in others” (195). This echo of the word “essences” shows why evolutionism was so unsettling for notions of humanity, as biologically, humans had no innate quality—not even reason—that distinguished them as special. Rachels emphasizes this line of argument and shows how Darwin’s figuration of “man” was consequential beyond its challenge to traditional religious notions of creation. According to Rachels,

The idea of a unique human mental capacity—a capacity unlike anything to be found elsewhere in nature—may be viewed as the secular equivalent of the idea that man was created in the image of God…It buttresses the idea that, from a moral point of view, humans are special…Secular thinkers…can…continue to believe in human dignity, and can justify doing so by pointing to man’s unique rationality. (88)

In other words, Darwin’s positioning of the human was affecting not only because it displaced Adam and Eve; in a post-Enlightenment, post-Cartesian context, his ideas were disturbing because they unsettled secular assurance of human exceptionality. If humans shared lineage with apes and even “lower” organisms, then the irrationality supposedly inherent to animality was part of humans’ heritage as well. Not only are humans subject to irrational animal drives, according to this view, but animals themselves can also lay claim to reason, as Darwin observes, “Of all the faculties of the human mind, it will, I presume, be admitted that Reason stands at the summit. Only a few persons now dispute that animals possess some power of reasoning. Animals may constantly be seen to pause, deliberate, and resolve” (*DM* 219). While Darwin carefully acknowledges that reason is the premier quality of humans, he nevertheless refuses to relegate it as an exclusively human capacity; instead, to support his claim for humans’ and animals’ shared lineage, he points out that animals share this capacity. Therefore, no longer could rationality be the presumed distinction of humanity, and following this, the divide between nature and culture could potentially blur.

In the context of Western modernity, those persons identified as “primitive” or “savage” were displaced upon this liminal space, allowing Europeans to equate their perceived markers of whiteness with rationality and to ward off the phantom of their own material animality; as suggested by the emphasis on rationality—traditionally associated with masculinity—a similar kind of demarcation applied to women. According to Ted Benton, Darwin’s recognition of “human *kinship* with non-human animals affords new ways of thinking about human nature itself” (91, emphasis original). Indeed, Darwin’s focus on affinities—in other words, his preoccupation with how sameness and difference arose in organic life—unsettled the notion of the human as a stable definition. However, these questions of kinship, sameness, and difference became subsumed in hierarchies of the human that deployed evolutionist theory, particularly its sense of temporal history, to further narrow the definition of full humanity to white masculinity. To create this privileged position, racialized and gendered others had to be relegated to the animal realm, or at least closer to its borders of kinship. The continuum of human and animal was thus glossed over by a hierarchy of rationality.

Modernity’s self-conscious sense of historical progress is a key pillar in modern hierarchies of race and gender. The characterization of people of color as “childlike” suggests the centrality of this scheme, as likening whole groups of people to children implies their lack of development or maturity, which in turn depends on the progress of time. The sense of being stuck in time at an earlier stage is also suggested by the designating term “primitive.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the root of this word is the meaning “prime” or “first,” in the sense of being early and not yet refined; furthermore, the *OED*’s leading definitions for the word include “an ancestor or progenitor; a predecessor”; “an original inhabitant”; and “the earliest stages, the beginnings” (“Primitive”). The classification of colonized and/or racialized people as primitive thus implies their belonging to an earlier “stage” of history, which is contrasted with the enlightened, civilized modern age. This link between racialized people and the modern sense of temporality has been examined by Anne McClintock, whose concept “anachronistic space” is valuable for illuminating how Western modernity’s sense of its own history renders racialized people as inferior. McClintock argues that “indigenous peoples” are “symbolically displaced onto what I call *anachronistic space*” (30, emphasis original) in order to facilitate the imperialist seizure of their lands, and thus, “according to this trope, colonized people—like women and the working class in the metropolis—do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency—the living embodiment of the archaic ‘primitive’” (30). Like the paternalistic rationalization of the “White Man’s Burden,” the displacing of othered people to “anachronistic space” authorizes their subjugation via dehumanization. This dehumanization, rendering these groups of people as “bereft of human agency” and “irrational” due to their belonging to an “anterior time,” hinges on an evolutionist understanding of human history. These people lack humanity—in other words, are animalistic—and exist in an earlier stage of development because they have not yet evolved to the apex of white humanity, which alone possesses the rationality and agency that is the result of overcoming primitive bestial impulses.

Therefore, the conditions of modernity made the Darwinian articulation of evolution amenable to normalizing and hierarchizing procedures. The mobilization of this potentially radical discourse to bolster fixed hierarchy becomes explicable in the context of modernity and its inherent tensions. According to Rita Felski, “Rather than inscribing a homogenous cultural consensus, the discourses of modernity reveal multiple and conflicting responses to processes of social change” (15). Responses to “processes of social change,” such as industrialization and secularism, entailed both pessimism and optimism. The polysemic status of Darwin’s texts exemplifies the “conflicting” impulses of modernity, and in fact even constitute a key site of Western modernity’s latent tensions. Understanding the overarching cultural tendencies of the Western modern period—especially the tension between faith in civilized progress and pessimistic skepticism toward bourgeois values—clarifies the reverberations of cultural attitudes in Darwin’s texts and other evolutionist discourses. Matei Calinescu delineates the overarching polarity in modern sensibilities as between aesthetic modernism, which “opposed…bourgeois modernity, with its promises of indefinite progress…To protest…the ‘decadents’ cultivated the consciousness of their *own* alienation” (162, emphasis original), and bourgeois modernity, which (to echo Reddy, above) embraced progress and industry, as “The doctrine of progress, the confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, the concern with time…, the cult of reason” were “associated in various degrees with the battle for the modern and were kept alive and promoted as key values in the triumphant civilization established by the middle class” (41-42). While this dichotomy can be further complicated, the contrast between aestheticism and its contention with the crisis of meaning, defined as “modernism,” and bourgeois values of progress and reason, defined as “modernity,” provides a useful framework for understanding the principal trends in Western modern thought. This tension between modernism and modernity can be extended to the meanings found in the evolutionist framework: its apparent confirmation of human irrationality and history’s aimless course have profound implications for modernist uncertainty, while the progressive development suggested by the evolutionist timeline can align with modernity’s confidence in its own civilized rationality.

Modernity’s self-assurance in its own rationality is especially consequential when examining the dissemination of scientific ideas such as evolution. One of the key changes provoking both crisis and confidence was growing secularization and the concomitant increased status of science as prime frame of reference. In fact, Western modernity and the accompanying nineteenth-century consolidation of racialized and gendered hierarchies developed in accordance with science’s elevation as “arbiter of reality” (Sander L. Gilman 28). The elevated status of science as the most reliable source for judging reality must be emphasized, because it shows that science’s effects in the nineteenth century extended beyond technological changes or even altered creation myths—they transformed ontological understandings of the world and of humans. Latour shows how the reorienting effects of science were integral to modernity, as according to its self-understanding, “Modernization consists in continually exiting from an obscure age that mingled the needs of society with scientific truth, in order to enter into a new age that will finally distinguish clearly what belongs to atemporal nature and what comes from humans, what depends on things and what belongs to signs” (71). In other words, the status of science in modernity entailed an increased division between the material world and the realm of rational discourse; nature became a collection of “things” or objects separate from human “signs” or discursive systems, which enabled the popular understandings of scientists as chief explainers of natural objects and of human history as distinct from “atemporal” nature.

Indeed, Darwin’s position as scientist suggested a status authorized to delineating nature’s contents. The scientist’s assumed mastery was a result of the Cartesianism that helped institute modernity. According to Susan Bordo, this “model of knowledge” held that “the purity of the intellect is guaranteed through its ability to transcend the body” and “the spiritual and the corporeal are now two distinct substances” (99). The scientist’s authority thus derived from his mastery of rationality and his refusal of embodiment’s burdens, as I further discuss in Chapter 2.[[14]](#footnote-14) From this central logic proceeded the nineteenth-century elevation of the scientist as reality’s preeminent authority, as possessing the will and rationality to inscribe materiality and to make transparent nature’s mysteries. This elevation of the scientist thereby hinged on the same Cartesian logic that rendered racialized and gendered subjects as inferior due to their lack of rationality, or in other words, their excess of materiality. As Laura Doyle states, in “the metaphysics of racial patriarchy,” the “hierarchy of spirit over matter legitimizes hierarchies of race and sex” (59). White masculinity and “spirit” (or disembodied rationality), parallel to each other, are designated superior, which in turn corresponds with the modern assumption that humans—a rank only enjoyed by those not marked as other—are distinguished from the material world via their rationality. Therefore, the pervasive influence of Darwin and other evolutionists’ claims arose from a logic that figured them as arbiters of nature. More specifically, evolutionary theory—with its focus on questions of origins, development, sameness, and difference—was harnessed, in both scientific and popular discourse, as a method for inscribing and demarcating human difference in order to accommodate nineteenth-century anxieties concerning race and gender.

## Science, Language, and Affect

The logic of modernity rendered Darwin and his successors as authorities who made explicable the origin of species, including human beings and their variety. The underlying premise of this view is the nature/culture divide, by which modernity displaced certain human bodies, perceived as not yet achieving this divide or overcoming base materiality, to a premodern “atemporal” age or state. While the notion of “science” was elevated as a key ideal of objectivity, its methods and discourse still remained susceptible to the influence, and limits, of human perspectives. Indeed, twentieth-century science studies have shown that, rather than purely uncovering reality, scientific discourse cannot completely disclose nature itself and may in fact distort it via language and/or its practitioners’ own biases.[[15]](#footnote-15) In the humanities, science’s malleability to subjective experience is well-established. Thomas Kuhn’s historical examination of science, published in 1962, is representative of this viewpoint, as he argues: “An apparently arbitrary element, compounded of personal and historical accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given time” (4). In other words, this “arbitrary” element, consisting of “personal and historical” factors, exerts an inescapable influence on scientific claims’ formation and acceptability. My situating Darwin’s ideas in the context of modernity clearly concurs with this recognition.

However, it must be stated that this critique of scientific objectivity does not imply that science’s claims are somehow untrue or imaginary. My analysis of Darwinian theory does not assume that it is merely, or only, discourse; it simply draws attention to its circulation in a sociocultural field. Analyzing the circulation of scientific claims in discursive and literary renderings of the human must resist the pat belief that the sciences and the humanities are starkly divided, with its implication that one must subsume the other; instead, this analysis draws attention to how modern culture and materiality constitute a field of exchange. George Levine emphasizes the importance of resisting the “two cultures” formulation (as elaborated by C.P. Snow), as he argues of science’s relation to literature: “The subject of ‘science and literature’…matters because the conjunction of the two sometimes radically separated worlds of discourse helps illuminate each, helps demystify each as they sit apart under cloaks of unmerited authority—objective or subjective” (“One Culture” 5). The assumption that science and literature are completely separate, and that only the latter relates to discourse and culture, forecloses insight into their varied effects, both separately and together, and reinforces the reductive view of these disciplines as comprising a dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity.

Moreover, Latour provides crucial perspective on how to examine the interaction between science and discourse without reducing them to distinct, opposed fields. Latour interrogates the assumed dichotomy between science and discourse, and argues, “Yes, the scientific facts are indeed constructed, but they cannot be reduced to the social dimension because this dimension is populated by objects mobilized to construct it. Yes, those objects are real, but they look so much like social actors that they cannot be reduced to the reality ‘out there’ invented by the philosophers of science” (6). Latour emphasizes the concrete materiality of science’s objects of investigation, while clarifying that, at the same time, these objects are so embedded in the social and discursive spheres that they cannot be conceived as autonomous pure reality. Latour’s claim that scientific objects look like “social actors” is particularly instructive in drawing attention to how they occupy modes of action—and interaction—that bear upon the social. Latour calls this interaction between fields a “network,” stating, “The networks are *simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society*” (6, emphasis original). This notion of “network” is useful for analyzing the cultural and literary resonances of Darwinian theory, as it acknowledges how the exchange between scientific objects, language, narrative, and larger cultural formations produce meanings about the human.

As a necessary instrument of communication, language is a significant actor in scientific endeavors, and thus occupies a key role in the particular ways scientific claims take shape and become understood. Examining the circulation between scientific claims and cultural formations entails considering how the explication of natural objects and processes is beholden to the limits and possibilities of language. Language is of course not neutral, as it is a system of meaning-making unavoidably imbued with value and, as J.M. Coetzee explains in his revealing analysis of Isaac Newton’s use of syntax, is “too protean to be tied down to single, pure meanings” (11). As Haraway incisively states, “grammar is politics by other means” (*Simians* 3).

This is particularly relevant when discussing Darwin’s articulation of his ideas and others’ reception of them, as they approach elemental questions about the status of the human. Regarding Darwin’s use of language, Beer argues,

[Darwin] did not *invent* laws. He *described* them. Indeed, it was essential to his project that it should be accepted not as invention, but description. His work is, therefore, conditional upon the means of description: that is, upon language. And his description is necessarily conditioned by the assumptions and beliefs condensed in the various kinds of discourse active at the time he was writing. (46, emphases original)

In other words, by attempting to offer an account of wide-ranging natural processes, Darwin used descriptive techniques. However, it’s important to note that description itself, as a process requiring assembly and sequencing, entails “invention,” and does not simply arise from observation; although Darwin aimed at simply articulating evolutionary processes, doing so necessarily required mediating those processes. While Beer glosses this over somewhat, her point that description is “conditioned by the assumptions” embedded in discourse and its context nonetheless draws attention to how Darwin’s scientific enterprise necessarily partakes in cultural networks. In addition to influencing the construction of scientific claims, I focus on how the conditioning effects of language direct, via suggestion and multivalence, subsequent interpretations and mobilizations of these claims.

Evolutionary theory’s treatment of organic processes and matter renders it especially dense with meaning. Biology, unlike the incorporeal concerns of the physical sciences, counts human beings among its objects of interest. Thus, biology and associated disciplines necessarily entail the objectification of human bodies within their schemes of study; and, as is made clear by responses to evolutionary theory, study of the wider natural world is fraught with implications for defining the positioning of humanity. Sander L. Gilman makes this clear in his critique of nineteenth-century medicine and related fields, as he argues, “In examining the language of science we begin to understand the underlying presupposition about human nature” (28). Scientific discourse—whether disciplinary or popular—about the material world, and humans in particular, is bound to latent assumptions. Using the tools of literary analysis to uncover these assumptions reveals the elasticity of scientific discourse and its mutual diffusion with cultural renderings and ideologies of the human. Haraway emphasizes, “Biology has intrinsically been a branch of political discourse” (*Simians* 98), which is seen in its history of legitimizing white men as the authorized translators of nature. Biology’s political force also arises from the related issue that its scientists attempt to assess and define not laws of motion or atomic structures, but the embodied existence of subjects who occupy different positions in a social structure also inhabited by the scientist.

Hence the concept of biopolitics or biopower, which examines how biology has been wielded as a political tool for subjugating certain human groups, and what Michel Foucault calls “one of the basic phenomena of the nineteenth century…power’s hold over life” (239). Biopolitics theory asserts that the very biological constitution of human groups is exploited as a condition of vulnerability and thus as a means of control. In this view, biology is a resource for control—however, its political role extends beyond this. Foucault notes that the “mechanisms” employed by biopolitics include “overall measures,” as “security mechanisms have to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize a state of life” (246). This can be related to the mobilization of evolutionary theory; despite the aleatory, unpredictable processes that Darwin identifies as intrinsic to evolution, the popular recourse to evolution as evidence of racial and gender hierarchy indicates attempts to “install security” around its unpredictability via the logic of categorization. The “optimal state of life” is white masculinity, and racialized and gendered subjects exist outside this state or as tools for its optimization. So, evolutionist hierarchies provide a “measure” of human, and less than human, types, which then results in the devaluation of their lives and/or the control of their reproduction. Moreover, Foucault argues that, on the whole, biopolitics is “a matter of taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined, but regularized” (246-47). While Foucault here identifies this “regularization” as the monitoring and maintenance of population-wide processes such as the birth rate, mortality, aging, and so on, this overall goal of “regularization” can also be viewed as the entrenchment of racializing and gendering procedures as biological givens. Indeed, since Darwin’s first articulation, evolutionary theory has served as a regulatory mechanism for these categories, as natural selection became an agent for fixing human hierarchies and its timespan became a narrative of triumphant Western civilization. Biopolitics thus illuminates the unique significance of biology as a scientific field of study, and how its influence fans out as an epistemological and methodological authority for regulating domains of the human.

Biological discourse, and evolutionary theory in particular, thus possesses distinct responsibility for influencing, or recapitulating, sociocultural ideological constraining and valuing of human materiality. Affect theory provides a valuable interpretative framework for analyzing how evolutionist theory’s language, metaphor, and concepts are bound to cultural assumptions imbued with value and thus subject to affective responses. Sara Ahmed explicates affect’s cultural and political functioning in her theory of the circulation between affect and objects, in which “affect is what sticks, or what sustains and preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (“Happy Objects” 39). According to Ahmed, this affective stickiness operates via emotional stances, and responses, toward certain objects, as “emotions can move through the movement or circulation of objects. Such objects become…saturated with affect, as sites of personal or social tension” (*Cultural Politics* 11). In other words, Ahmed identifies emotions as not just individual, but as states or feelings that participate in the culture at large and become attached, or “stick,” to certain particularly resonant objects. By conceiving of emotion as moving in a cultural, collective sphere, Ahmed emphasizes its social and political dimensions; objects—such as words, images, bodies, or ideas—become “saturated” with affect, or inextricably bound with emotions or values, because their suggestiveness provoke strong cultural feelings.

This conception of affect thereby provides a means of theorizing how evolutionism has constituted a potent crux for questions of the human. Indeed, Venla Oikkonen draws upon affect theory in her feminist analysis of contemporary discourse about genomics, in which she shows how genomic mapping of our earliest human ancestors is represented by popular discourse affirming heteronormative coupledom and participating in racialized assumptions about Africa. Oikkonen argues, “texts about science appropriate a cultural logic of emotions” (“Mitochondrial” 753) and, furthermore, “such emotions invite audiences to sympathize with particular ideological positions” (“Mitochondrial” 762). Oikkonen thus highlights the affective, and hence ideological, density of scientific claims. Following this, evolutionist theory attains its significance because its delineation of species difference and material history raise questions about the status of humanity relative to animals and threatens Western modernity’s emotionally charged confidence in its own superiority. Correspondingly, evolutionary theory’s contentions with defining the human, investigating origins and difference, and charting timespans are all “sites of tension” saturated with affect. In the specific cultural context of the nineteenth-century West, this affect furthermore sticks to Darwin’s concepts of natural and sexual selection and the affiliated objects of racial and gender difference.

Affect, as suggested by its focus on emotional states and their manifestations across bodies and via discourse, also concerns how agency, as the ability for self-directed actions and decisions, is inscribed upon bodies and through discourse. The issue of agency is distinctly consequential when examining evolutionary theory for two reasons. First, evolution’s description of organic processes is complicated by the implication of a force behind these processes. Second, evolution’s emphasis on human-animal kinship and attempts to discern species lines evokes how presumed agency is used to distinguish the human from the animal. In light of these concerns, Mel Y. Chen’s discussion of “animacy” shows how language inscribes agency and thereby signals degrees of humanization and dehumanization.

Chen defines “animacy” as “the quality of liveness, sentience, or humanness of a noun or noun phrase that has grammatical, often syntactic, consequences” (24). As suggested by the linkage between “liveness,” “sentience,” and “humanness” here, Chen emphasizes that levels of animacy align with dominant hierarchies that position white masculinity as most animate—or in other words, most agential and human—at the apex, with the below structure descending from marginalized humans, to animals and non-animal objects, each correlated with decreasing levels of animacy (26-27). By highlighting its “grammatical” and “syntactic” reverberations, Chen provides a means of identifying how degrees of value are embedded in language. Attention to grammatical animacy allows further interrogation of scientific discourse, as this approach’s attention to particular linguistic features supports the claims that science and literature “are both language systems” (Dimock and Wald 706) and that “a dense complicity between thought and language” is present in scientific discourse (Coetzee 9). Chen’s animacies allows careful analysis of scientific, and literary, discourse’s “complicity” with ideology; as Chen emphasizes, “words more than signify; they affect and effect” (54). Language cannot be neutral—it exceeds transparent representation, and instead invites affective associations and suggests varying intensities of life. Evolutionist discourse, then, provokes feelings and manifests animacy, thereby proving ripe for ideological mobilizations and affective, political circulation with cultural formations and literary texts.

## The Logic of Natural Selection and the Problem of Agency

It is now stating the obvious to claim that Darwin’s account of evolution provoked controversy because its explication of organic life’s origins and development threatened to displace the Judeo-Christian ideal of monotheistic divine creation, and instead, suggested that all life, including humans, was the result of strictly material forces. While Darwin’s account still remains controversial for some religious believers, what is of interest here is how, despite his attempts to explain evolutionary processes as impersonal and “natural,” his articulation of evolution nonetheless implies—intentionally or not—some kind of driving force behind these processes, a feature which haunts subsequent framings of evolution. This driving force is suggested in the phrase “natural selection” itself, as the verb “selection,” due to the rules of English grammar, necessarily implies a subject. This is significant because, even if Darwin and other scientists conceive of natural selection not as an action done by someone or something, but rather, as a process inhering in nature itself, the descriptions of natural selection as an activity generate a sense of animacy regarding these processes. Natural selection as an animate force, in a context that elevates reason above matter, hence becomes articulated as a rational energy, even agent, directing evolutionary progress toward its culmination, white masculinity.

The evolutionist account, therefore, invites questions of agency and intention. As stated, this problem partly arises from the rules of English grammar, particularly the syntactical structure of subject and verb. Beer addresses when she writes “The profound importance of Darwin’s idea was in revealing a new dynamic for change and in disclosing a fresh space occupied neither by concepts of design nor of use. The abiding problem for Darwin was how to express it in a language which was imbued with intentionality” (81). As Beer points out, Darwin is careful to stress that species arise not from “design,” but rather from chance. For example, he states, “each species had not been independently created, but had descended, like varieties, from other species” (*OS* 96) and “When I view all beings not as special creations, but as lineal descendants…they seem to me to become ennobled” (*OS* 174). Darwin specifically contrasts the process of natural selection with the act of “creation,” and so challenges the idea of divinely ordained creation. Instead of “independent” or “special” creations, living beings acquire their unique traits via nature, or materiality, via descent, which thereby suggests that chance plays a crucial role in the process, as the organic states of living, reproducing, and dying are unpredictable. Darwin’s statement that this view “ennobles” organic life allows him to further contrast this process with Christian creation while still maintaining a sense of wonder or reverence regarding nature.

Moreover, Darwin often eliminates the subject in his verb usage. Indeed, in explaining “natural selection,” Darwin states, “The preservation of favorable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection. Variations neither useful nor injurious would not be affected by natural selection, and would be left a fluctuating element” (*OS* 112). In this statement, the actions and their implicit subjects undergo an interesting shift. The nominalized verbs “preservation” and “rejection” lack clear subjects; Darwin uses them to show how organisms’ traits develop both via reproduction (preservation) and via elimination qua death (rejection). While these verbs have no human subjects, they both imply some kind of agential intention, as the acts of both preserving and rejecting entail some kind of actor making a choice. Darwin subsumes these verbs under the larger operation of “Natural Selection,” which almost becomes a subject itself, as it encompasses both of the prior verbs. This subjectification is continued in the next sentence, in which Darwin claims that natural selection “affects” variations and “leaves” elements. Natural selection, in directing these actions, thus becomes a kind of actor and accumulates a sense of animacy. Yet the phrase “natural selection,” of course, is absent a human and sentient subject, and rather contains the noun form of the verb “select.” The noun form enables this force to occupy a space between subject and verb: as a verb, it allows the reader to understand how evolution proceeds via the actions of survival and reproduction, while as a subject, it conveys an image of force that centralizes these processes and renders them comprehensible. Darwin uses the phrase “natural selection” as a way of streamlining the multitude of activities that comprise evolution.

In the quotation above, Darwin maintains a sense of the arbitrariness that characterizes evolution, as he points out that it depends on “variation,” and that some variations exist as “fluctuating” elements—a vast array of differences make possible evolution, and an uncontainable element of flux, or ever-present change, is necessarily a part of this process. But the identification of “natural selection” in particular allows him to highlight the key activities of preservation via reproduction and rejection via death and how these proceed due to the advantages, or disadvantages, of variations. So, passive voice allows Darwin to render an entangled set of processes as a comprehensible set of definite actions. J.M. Coetzee, in examining Newton’s verb usage, notes how passive construction enables the articulation of impersonal processes within the confines of English syntax, because “the link between syntactic subjecthood and semantic agency is not easily broken” (8). Coetzee continues that, “in English, in particular, the initial resistance to be met is that the standard Subject-Verb-Object order has come to be associated with a certain meaning: it is iconic both of time order and of causal order” (8). While passive voice, by eliminating or displacing the subject, disrupts this “order” to a certain extent, it cannot completely escape it, as the verb’s requiring a subject is felt even when the subject is absent. While the “time order” and “causal order” may not be immediately apparent in Darwin’s above use of passive voice, they are nonetheless endemic to his construction simply because he must use verbs, and due to his personification of natural selection. Thus, as Beer points out in the above-cited quotation, his language is “imbued with intentionality.” Darwin’s articulation of “natural selection’ as an acting force suggests agency, which in turn, creates an impression of “causal order,” which in its context, could be read as the underlying structure driving organic development toward European civilization.

Consequently, this organizational framework enables evolutionary theory to become a resource for various arguments about the ultimate, intrinsic nature of humanity. Darwin’s consolidation of the messy, fluctuating processes of adaptation, survival, and reproduction made his theory comprehensible in its cultural context, which simultaneously made it amenable to ideological mobilization. Natural selection as evolution’s centralized agency made this especially so. Indeed, Darwin’s account of evolution was colored by the narrative forms of his time. Beer argues, “In the process of Darwin’s thought” we see “the impulse to…find a real place in the natural order for older mythological expressions” (74). I argue that this is evident in his personification of nature (via natural selection) as an active agent and in his use of metaphors such as the “tree of life” (*OS* 135).

Moreover, Darwin’s account of nature specifically drew inspiration from theories of human social order. In particular, he cites Thomas Malthus as a resource, stating that the concept of the “struggle for existence” as driving organisms’ adaptation “is the doctrine of Malthus, applied to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms” (*OS* 97). Darwin’s use of the word “doctrine” suggests a stable set of principles by which the animal (including human) and vegetable “kingdoms” abide; while the principal source of this doctrine is ambiguous here, its religious connotations imply some kind of conscious or transcendent force driving the “struggle for existence” and evolution itself. Darwin uses human politics to explain natural processes, and his use of Malthus’s narrative as a kind of screening explanation opens his claims toward political mobilization. Regarding the political dimensions of biology, Haraway argues, sciences “act as legitimating meta-languages that produce homologies between social and symbolic systems” (*Simians* 42). Darwin’s deployment of Malthusian logic, and others’ later deployments of his own theory, exemplify this operation. The initiating circulation between the political philosopher, Malthus, and the scientist, Darwin, indicates the ease with which organic materiality becomes a parallel for human culture. Affect imbues Darwin’s claims, as his explications of impersonal processes are saturated with assumptions about human order, which in turn is imbued with affective associations. Darwin’s use of the verb “applied” suggests this relay: Malthus’s ideas about human nature transfer easily to nonhuman organisms, as to “apply” suggests no change in the transfer, but rather simple substitution or imprinting. This idea of application thus sets the stage for using the evolutionist account of the development of organic life as a model, or a reflection, of human behavior, a process which relies on logic which takes certain social structures—colonialism, enslavement, masculine rationality, the maternal imperative—for granted as self-evidently “natural.”

This suggested linkage between the natural order as a whole and human society in particular is reinforced by the animate quality of natural selection. As stated above, the absent but implied subject in this phrase creates a sense of a mysterious, yet present, force or consciousness directing evolution. A particularly revealing example is Darwin’s statement, “As natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection” (*OS* 174). The use of the verb “works” with “natural selection” as its subject animates the phrase. “Work” can be read as a mechanistic kind of operation, yet with “selection” as a subject, it also suggests a forward movement of directing and choosing. Additionally, while “good” strictly denotes whatever a “being” needs to survive and reproduce—this is the sole “good” in evolution—its affective resonances imply that natural selection proceeds as a matter of making better, as a process of improvement. The prepositions “by” and “for” further complicate the matter. “By,” like passive voice, enables some withdrawal from agential subjecthood, as it suggests that natural selection works *via* survival and reproduction. However, “for” suggests the idea that natural selection works *for* each being; in other words, it acts with intention as a benevolent agent directing evolution toward more developed forms. The last clause of the sentence reinforces this idea. Like “good,” the word “perfection,” in its strictest sense, simply means the best fit for environment, but again, the word “perfection” has strong affective resonances, and suggests the highest good. Darwin’s linkage of “perfection” with “progress” indeed emphasizes this meaning, as “progress” suggests continual forward advancement. While the verb tense “will” shows that this process is ongoing, the implied agency of natural selection as directing evolution forward toward better things nonetheless strongly accord with nineteenth-century ideas that European civilization was the result of historical progress toward perfection. Elsewhere, Darwin is careful to point out that natural selection proceeds not by agential choice, but “by the accumulation of innumerable slight variations” and is not the same, but “analogous,” with “human reason” (*OS* 158). Therefore, while he uses analogy as a way to articulate slow, dense processes of accumulation, this analogy itself, however necessary, elicits interpretations of evolutionary processes as aligning with, or underlying, features of human societies.

Beer emphasizes the potential multivalence of Darwin’s argument, as “seemingly stable terms may come gradually to operate as generative metaphors, revealing inherent heterogeneity of meaning and ideology” (50). I have shown that the “generative” potential and “inherent heterogeneity” of evolutionist terms is evident in “natural selection.” The problem of articulating desubjectified processes in English syntax constrains Darwin, and his careful avoidance of assigning a definite subject exists in tension with latent agency and affective resonances. Regarding this tension in scientific writing, Coetzee observes, “on the one hand we [the modern West] tend to excerpt objects out of the endless flow of nature because we have nouns that predispose us to do so…on the other hand we see actions and forces where our verbs predispose us to see them” (4). In the “endless flow of nature,” Darwin isolates the processes that enable life forms to continually develop in accordance with their environments and pass on advantageous traits along lines of descent. But, as Coetzee shows, this isolating articulation requires subjects and verbs, which, according to modern Western epistemology, suggests linear, atomized, rational direction due to the identification of a definite, distinct action in natural selection. Natural selection thus becomes an agent that directs and fixes racial difference and instrumentalizes womanhood. Darwin’s elaboration of evolution’s timeline also grapples with this tension between randomness and linearity and further reinforces Western modernity’s teleological understanding of its place in human history.

**Temporality Fixed in Narrative**

Darwin explains the origin of species in terms of, to borrow a phrase from Peter Brooks, “temporal succession” (10). Darwin begins his argument,

In considering the Origin of Species, it is quite conceivable that a naturalist, reflecting on the mutual affinities of organic beings…and other such facts, might come to the conclusion that each species had not been independently created, but had descended, like varieties, from other species. Nevertheless, such a conclusion, even if well founded, would be unsatisfactory, until it could be shown how the innumerable species inhabiting this world have been modified, so as to acquire that perfection of structure and coadaptation which most justly excites our admiration. (96)

According to Darwin’s argument here, the emergence of organic difference proceeds via the incremental accumulation, and multiplication of, variety, as “each species” appears to be a “variety” of others “via descent.” This process becomes discernible via the visibility of species’ “mutual affinities”; in other words, the recognition of material similarity begs the question of how to account for differences, and vice versa. If the structures of organic beings, and their mutual relationships, suggest sameness, then how did difference arise? Considered from another angle, if there are now differences, then why does sameness remain?

Darwin quickly follows up these implicit questions with the proposal that “modification,” or change, has given rise to varieties, and hence species, via descent. Since the biological mechanism of descent—propagation—occurs over long stretches of time through generations, then a narrative of this development must be constructed. This point is supported by Beer, who argues, “because of its preoccupation with time and change evolutionary theory has inherent affinities with the problems and processes of narrative” (5). George Levine also notes, “Darwinian explanation is necessarily narrative,” as it proposes “the most probable of possible stories” (“Paradoxes” 115). This reliance on “probability” is acknowledged by Darwin, above, as he clarifies that his argument arises from the suppositions borne of observations—questions about the development of sameness and difference must be discursively answered by narrative reconstruction. Beer calls Darwin’s articulation of his claims “a backward story told laterally” as she argues that his narrative precludes resolution, and that “nowhere does Darwin give a glimpse of future forms” (xix). While Darwin indeed leaves the question of “future forms” open, the very process of constructing a “backward story” implies, or at the least invites, closure, as this is part of the act of storytelling itself (as Beer herself acknowledges elsewhere). This is especially so when Darwin’s texts and others’ subsequent discourse attempt to grapple with the contemporaneous positioning of humanity, in particular, relative to other organisms.

To make the process of evolution comprehensible, it is thus presented in a familiarizing narrative structure in which events, due to some underlying logic (i.e., natural selection), give rise to more events. As shown by the quotation of Darwin above, this narrativizing also smooths out the snarly wrinkles innate to the problem of explicating, from an anthropic point of view, the development of all organic life forms. While natural selection is identified as the underlying logic that motivates this oscillation between sameness and difference, Darwin still must explain how organic life’s proliferation of differences has proceeded over a long period of time, as well as how the abundance of species and varieties in the current age (including humans) arose from the sameness suggested by “mutual affinities.” The logic of natural selection needed to be affixed in a timeline. Thus, in Darwin’s argument, the pervasive tension between sameness and difference becomes ironed out into “descent,” with its connotations of straight direction, which results in “perfection of structure,” implying an achievement toward which these forms strive. While “perfection” can simply be interpreted as the best fit for a given organism’s environment and sustenance, the affective resonances of that word also suggest an innate teleology; perfection, after all, implies an absence of flaws, and if this is so, then further adjustment to circumstances is no longer needed. There is nothing left to accomplish after one has arrived at perfection, as suggested by Western modernity’s teleological orientation toward history. In this initiation of Darwin’s argument, the proliferations of materiality become streamlined into the conventional sequence of narrative resolution.

The process of evolution thus becomes comprehensible as a plot, in which plot is “the logic and dynamic of narrative, and narrative itself a form of understanding and explanation” (Brooks 10). Temporal succession is, of course, the foundation of evolution itself, since the mechanism of natural selection, in order to operate, hinges on the passing of time—in this sense, the relations between life, death, and time take on new meaning. However, it is particularly significant that this organic process contingent on time becomes intelligible in the discursive framework of narrative. If “stories are a core aspect of the constitution of an object of scientific knowledge” (Haraway, *Simians* 82), then the envelopment of the evolutionary process’s temporal movement into a narrative structure makes it a participant in concurrent narrative practices and an influence on subsequent ones. What also makes it interesting is how Darwin’s narratives are on the verge of exceeding tidy limitations and herald modernist critiques of stable, predictable hierarchies; as I show, this threat of excess is what made the transatlantic patriarchal stabilization of Darwin’s narratives so imperative for male scientists and dominant discourse. Moreover, the structuring into plot must be considered with the dependence on organic materiality as self-revealing. In the evolutionary framework, the succession of time is meaningless without materiality, and this materiality only accumulates difference through the succession of time.

While evolutionism’s role in challenging traditional religious understandings of the world is widely understood, it is still worth noting how the question of origins, from a secular perspective, forms the crux of Darwin’s argument and perhaps even constitutes its motivating force. Indeed, Felksi argues, “Darwin’s theory of natural selection, which might appear to indicate the random and purposeless nature of human activity, was frequently refashioned to convey a view of history as purposeful and goal-directed, offering a secularized version of a Christian redemption narrative” (155). This is clearly shown in the key words in the titles of his major texts, “origin” and “descent.” The narrative structuring of his argument must be understood in terms of this preoccupation, as the delineation of the origin of organic difference and its consequent development becomes comprehensible—and simplified—via narrative. Elizabeth Grosz notes that for Darwin, “the origin can be nothing but a difference” (*Nick* 21), thus neatly encapsulating the latent tensions in his foundational inquiries. Therefore, Darwin’s narrative is structured in terms of change and difference; its forward motion in time is made visible by difference itself. However, its very narrative structuring, particularly its movement from simple, unitary origins towards increased complexity aligns with nineteenth to early twentieth century views of the progress of civilization itself, from primitive and material to complex and rational.

However, while this analysis of syntactical agency and narrative direction in Darwin’s *Origin* shows how it became amenable to subsequent scientific and anthropological racism and sexism, Darwin’s meaning-laden articulation of evolution can still generate novel, radical interpretations. For instance, Grosz offers alternative possibilities for considering the theoretical and cultural implications of Darwin’s theory. She reads Darwinian theory as affirmation of difference and productive change. Grosz pays special attention to Darwin’s recurrent emphasis on variation and flux (*Nick* 26).In other words, in contrast to the Tree of Life image, the proliferation of difference, in all directions, is intrinsic to evolution itself. Grosz explains the political potential of this way of understanding evolution: “Darwin managed to make this dynamism, this imperative to change, the center of his understanding of life itself and the very debt that life owes to the enabling obstacle that is organized matter. This dynamism of life is the condition of not only cultural existence but also cultural resistance” (*Nick* 19). This view understands evolution as a vibrating exchange between matter and the processes of life, what Grosz also calls “active vectors of change” (*Nick* 19), rather than as a transcendent force acting upon inert matter. While this view does not resolve the problem of the implied agency of natural selection (a problem which may be unavoidable), it encourages us to recognize that scientific concepts are not bound to singular interpretations, but rather, that their cultural ramifications depend on one’s context and approach. Therefore, while evolutionist discourse in the nineteenth century—and well into the twentieth, and even today—implies natural selection as a directing agent, we can understand this as a consequence of the limits of using language to describe impersonal processes, while at the same time, strive for novel interpretations of matter and life beyond the hierarchy of animacy.

In this chapter, I have analyzed syntactical agency and linear narrative in Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in order to show how Darwin’s articulation suggested rational progress toward civilization, an understanding of evolution which strongly influenced late nineteenth to early twentieth century scientific and popular configurations of human hierarchy. In the next chapter, I examine how Darwin articulated the development of human racial and gender differences in *The Descent of Man*. I also look at Thomas Henry Huxley’s mid-nineteenth century anthropological essays, which influenced Darwin’s *Descent*. My analysis of the configuration of racial and gender hierarchy via evolutionary discourse in Chapter 2 establishes crucial background and context for my tracing of these evolutionist concepts in Larsen’s, Gilman’s, and Chopin’s works in Chapters 3 and 4.

# CHAPTER 2. THE VISUAL TAXONOMY AND MATERIAL INSTRUMENTS OF DESCENT: EVOLUTIONIST SCALES OF RACE AND GENDER

Following my reading of the *Origin* in Chapter 1, in this chapter, I show how embedded ideas of rationality and linearity in Darwin’s *The* *Descent of Man* and Huxley’s anthropological essays eased nineteenth-century anxieties about evolution. While Darwin and Huxley stress humans’ kinship with animals in order to advance their claims about human evolution, I analyze how language affirming the ultimate superiority of masculine civilization underlies these claims. The embedded ideas in Darwin and Huxley’s works enabled subsequent biologists and anthropologists to configure race and gender as stable categories. In the first part of this chapter, I focus on Huxley’s argument for human evolution and on Darwin’s account of human racial differences in the *Descent*. I show how the key concepts of rationality and species allowed Darwin, and subsequent evolutionists, to figure race as a fixed category originating in the deep past and as visually comprehensible. In this way, race becomes organized in scales of descent. In the second part of this chapter, I turn my attention to Darwin’s account of gender differences. In certain respects, this account echoes the evolutionist figuring of race, but in other key respects, it differs due to its dichotomizing of difference and the evolutionist preoccupation with women as instruments of maternity. Following this, I suggest that the concept of descent is also key to the evolutionist configuration of gender, as women are material propagators of racial difference.

Darwin’s accounts of racial and gender difference, then, established categorization and instrumentality, pivoting on descent, as means for justifying racial and gender hierarchy, which was further supported by subsequent late nineteenth and early twentieth century scientists and anthropologists. As I discussed in my Introduction, evolutionist grappling with human differences was particularly resonant in the turn-of-the-century United States. In the aftermath of the Civil War, in the face of a growing feminist movement, and in the midst of growing anxiety about immigration, the evolutionist configuration of racial and gender differences became a potent means for reinforcing hierarchy. I examine American women writers’ work in light of this context in Chapters 3 and 4; in this chapter, I analyze the roots of this configuration.

## Monkey Business: Anxious Kinship and Racial Categorization in Evolution

Alexander G. Weheliye locates racial classification—and its interaction with gender and sexuality—as epistemologically intrinsic to modern subjectivity, culture, and politics. Following Frantz Fanon, Weheliye refers to evolution as he argues, “The colonial encounter determines not just the black colonial subject’s familial structure or social and physical mobility and such, but colors his or her very being as he-or-she-which-is-not-quite-human, as always already tardy in the rigged match of the survival of the fittest” (26). Weheliye highlights how modern racialization consists not just of extrinsic political or cultural hegemony, but derives its power from the very way that it uses markers of race, such as skin color, as a self-evident ontological basis for determining the status of groups of people as “not-quite-human,” as something other than the human subject deserving full personhood. Moreover, Weheliye’s statement draws attention to how this determination is supported by the evolutionist paradigm’s temporal scheme and its whiffs of scientific validity. Racialized people lack human subjectivity because they are “tardy” in evolutionary development, in other words, behind in the progressive march toward civilized rationality.

The term “survival of the fittest,” of course, is familiar from popular understandings of evolution and social Darwinism and was originated by Herbert Spencer (Stocking, *Victorian* 135), not by Darwin himself. However, this term’s common usage and its immediate association with evolution exemplify how Darwin’s ideas were malleable to the mobilization of evolution as an evaluative framework of the human. The phrase “survival of the fittest” derives from Darwin’s concept of natural selection, which he identifies as the “Struggle for Existence” (*OS* 108). For example, in his use of the phrase in 1877, Thomas Henry Huxley alludes to Darwin, “The result of the struggle for existence would be the survival of the fittest among an indefinite number of varieties” (*Manual of the Anatomy*, 40). In emphasizing the superlative “fittest,” the phrase transforms the process of survival and hereditary transmission into a competition and implies evaluation of those who have apparently succeeded, or not, due to their fitness. Both “survival of the fittest” and, as I showed in Chapter 1, Darwin’s own term “natural selection” are fraught with implications of agency, which, intentionally or not, provokes the possibility of interpreting evolution and existing species as the results of some higher logic, which, by extension, can become the framework for categorical hierarchies. Thus, Weheliye identifies the logic of “survival of the fittest” as a key support for modern hierarchies of the human; the racialized subject, and the gendered subject, evidences their own failure at achieving the full fitness of humanity. Weheliye highlights the imbalanced scales of this determination, describing this hierarchized temporality as a “rigged match,” one already subject to existing power structures.

Darwin’s articulation of evolution and its subsequent popularization in the modern transatlantic West focused, in the broadest sense, on the kinship of all living beings. Darwin showed that this kinship is comprised of perpetual transmutation, producing a web of interdependence that allows for the accumulation of distinct traits along strands of material difference. The evolutionist account thereby drew attention to the links of kinship uniting all humans with each other, and indeed, with all animals. In a late nineteenth to early twentieth-century context that relied on categories of race to uphold systems of power, the kinship relations suggested by evolutionary science were re-stitched into taxonomies of innate difference. These fluctuating kinship relations were obscured, in particular, by the appropriation of the concept of descent, in which descent is the vehicle for preserving biological categories of difference. Descent functions as both the explanation and the maintenance of difference, thus enabling the stabilization of human typologies. Therefore, the teleological view of evolution as a narrative of progress, with its latent questions of origins and kinship, provoked Western science’s preoccupation with justifying and stabilizing human racial and gender categories.

Western science’s pre-evolutionist taxonomic drive continued in the evolutionist structuring of racial difference along the lines of descent. In the evolutionist narrative of linear progress toward Western civilization, the black race, in particular, was codified as primitive—that is, embodying an earlier, immature stage of human development. This primitive descent became visible via physical characteristics in a nineteenth-century context in which biology focused on the physical as self-revealing and in which modern technology fostered increased attention toward the visual. Thus, the evolutionist paradigm facilitated an understanding of race as explicitly signaling one’s categorization in a particular stage of humanity; specifically, the markings figured as denoting blackness displayed one’s membership in a line of descent separate from those human groups which had made further progress along the developmental timeline. According to this view, the black race, situated as most distinct from fully developed whiteness, constitutes a rupture in human progress away from animality, as this group exists as a living vestige of a less-developed variety of human being. Anne McClintock argue, “Social evolutionism and anthropology…gave to politics and economics a concept of natural time as *familial*” (38, emphasis original). McClintock sheds light on the significance of this discourse’s association between natural time and familial structures.

I draw particular attention to descent as a key concept in the evolutionist structuring of racial difference. Descent provides a legitimizing framework for racial categories, because descent is at once both stable and moving in time—following evolution’s focus on development over time, descent explains the emergence and coexistence of human varieties, while at the same time, it functions as a comprehensible chain signaling a distinct category of human type and contains kinship within each type. Moreover, my focus on the evolutionist view of descent as codifying racial difference helps to untangle how the nineteenth-century scientific positioning of race became interwoven with gender, as sex and reproduction maintain—yet potentially threaten—racial categories. One’s racial categorization is captured in physical appearance, which makes manifest one’s kinship and ancestral reproductive history, encompassed by the concept of descent.

This preoccupation with descent, and its linkage with evolutionist ideas of human and animal kinship, is clearly shown in the title of Darwin’s text *The Descent of Man* (1870), as well as that of the essay “Evidence as to Man’s Place in Nature” (1863) by Huxley, a close associate of Darwin’s. Analyzing these texts shows how the anxiety generated by Darwin’s recognition of humans’ kinship with animals provoked, and overlapped with, inquiry into the origins of human varieties, or races. Darwin and Huxley discursively engaged with each other’s ideas [footnote], and thus it is instructive to consider their texts together, as participating in a shared conversation. Huxley was instrumental, indeed tenacious, in affirmatively circulating Darwin’s ideas to a broader audience through “book, lecture, [and] serial publication,” adopting a “role as public controversialist seeking to keep Darwin’s text [the *Origin*] alive” (David Amigoni, *Colonies* 112). Huxley’s role as public scientist is highly relevant to the discourse of human evolution, since he was particularly interested in proving humans and animals’ common ancestry, as shown by his “vitriolic debate” with Richard Owen, which led in part to *Man’s Place*, “the first published statement to the general public applying the Darwinian hypothesis systematically to man” (George W. Stocking, *Victorian* 147). *Descent* and Huxley’s essays are key texts in nineteenth-century biological and anthropological discourse on human evolution, as they inspired subsequent scientists to seek answers to, and physical evidence of, the human evolutionary timeline.

Moreover, Darwin and Huxley’s works are particularly revealing because of their complex engagement with the concept of race. While neither advanced the kind of poisonous rhetoric advanced by some nineteenth-century racial science[[16]](#footnote-16)—indeed, Darwin and Huxley were abolitionists (Stepan 44, 79)—their claims about the origins and development of human varieties nevertheless assume the innate superiority of white Europeans and equivocate about the actual degree and weight of human varieties’ differences. Both Darwin’s and Huxley’s focus on the measurement and categorization of primate corporeal features—which they used as evidence to support their arguments that humans evolved from animals—suggest a biological perspective that viewed materiality as self-revealing. Both men’s attempts to demonstrate the relationship between humans and animals also hinged on broadly linear narratives of evolution, the development from simple to complex forms, a linear frame that accommodated interpretations that placed the “lower” races in an earlier position on that timeline.

Therefore, both Darwin and Huxley engage with the question of kinship, unafraid to acknowledge the animal-human relation—yet their ambiguities and evocations also show how these arguments about human evolution became amenable to racializing mobilizations. Nancy Stepan, in her meticulous examination of Victorian race science, summarizes the reverberating effects of Darwin’s thought: “evolutionism provided a new, emotionally charged, yet ostensibly scientific language with which to express old prejudices” (83). Indeed, the potency of Darwin and Huxley’s claims for the issues of kinship and descent, in terms of human varieties, was crystallized in subsequent race science ideas, particularly eugenics, phrenology, physical anthropology, and, of particular relevance to my focus on descent, the mono-polygenesis debate, which asked whether or not the different races descended from a common ancestor. Darwin’s, Huxley’s, and Western race scientists’ diverse approaches to scientific questions of racial difference show how the evolutionist paradigm fully penetrated Western concepts of race and authorized notions of human racial difference as consisting of discrete biological categories.

George W. Stocking critically examines the development of modern anthropology, including its relation to nineteenth-century concepts of evolution. Stocking shows how the construction of racial hierarchy constituted one of the founding maneuvers of anthropology, a maneuver epistemologically indebted to evolutionary theory, as he explains, “evolutionary racialism did not merely assert the existence of a hierarchy of distinct races, it offered a secular explanation of how that hierarchy had arisen, and gave to it the accumulated weight of evolutionary processes in a greatly extended span of time” (*Victorian* 237).

This evolutionist structuring of race is evident in literary texts that demonstrate the pervasiveness of this biological view of race and grapple with its effects on racialized subjects. Scholars have shown how images of non-white people as atavistic and threatening pervaded Victorian and modern texts; this image is perhaps most clearly exemplified by Joseph Conrad’s portrayal of native Africans in *Heart of Darkness*.[[17]](#footnote-17) Anne McClintock, Dana Seitler, and Virginia Richter, in particular, draw connections between turn-of-the-century race science and literary texts, showing how scientific discourse buttressed colonialist portrayals of racialized subjects as embodying humanity’s prehistoric past and even its ape-like, latent animality. Examining these exchanges between scientific and anthropological discourses and the proliferation of visual and literary texts, Seitler explains, “The tropes of bestiality, savagery, and atavism were…deployed to simultaneously police the line between human and animal species, white and black bodies, and civilized and primitive societies” (140). Seitler’s statement shows how concepts of time, animality, species, and civilization converged in response to the evolutionist timeline, and that these concepts became specifically linked to racial categories.

The work of these scholars is significant for situating scientific discourse within its context and for showing how anxieties about latent animality strongly influenced scientific and popular negotiations of racial difference. However, this work can be extended by further analyzing how these discourses became so entangled, and particularly, how the evolutionist paradigm became an instrument for classifications of the human. While the fear of animality—what Richter calls “anthropological anxiety” (8)—is certainly significant, it can also obscure the more difficult issues provoked by evolutionist approaches to human racial difference. Inquiries into Victorian and modern renderings of racialized subjects as atavistic and bestial are illuminating, yet they also leave open the question of the underlying logic and how, exactly, divisions between human and animal, white and black, became drawn along parallel boundaries. Examining the suggestions and contradictions permeating evolutionist discourse reveals how descent stabilizes the potential chaos of kinship into concrete categories.

In the *Descent of Man*, Darwin directly approaches the question of human origins, advancing the argument that humans have, in fact, developed to their current state via evolution. This argument clearly implies that humans share biological ancestry with animals, and Darwin uses the similarities, both physical and mental, between humans and animals as evidence for his claims. In delineating this kinship and pinpointing the position of the human in his larger scheme, Darwin also confronts the question of human difference, that is, how the apparent diversity of human types arrived at its present stage. In response to the *Origin*’s publication in 1859, much scientific discourse, particularly in the burgeoning field of physical anthropology, had circulated concerning the question of human origins in the evolutionary timeline, as George Stocking has shown in *Victorian Anthropology*. This discourse directly influenced Darwin himself, and as Stepan notes, by the time the *Descent* was published in 1871, “the debate on evolution, man and race had become quite heated,” and thus the *Descent* contained “many asides and expressions of Darwin’s agreements and disagreements with positions already taken” (50). Darwin’s text was a response to this debate, in which scientists and anthropologists advanced different perspectives regarding the biological, hereditary distinctions between races, perspectives which colored his position. In the *Descent*, Darwin clarified his own position by articulating and supporting his primary goal, demonstrating that humans share biological kinship with animals, which would support the broader point that *Homo sapiens* arose from evolution.

Darwin’s argument that humans evolved from lower animal forms hinges on the many similarities between humans and animals. To demonstrate the probable existence of this collective heredity, Darwin emphasizes common human and animal characteristics, paying special attention to our fellow mammals, primates in particular. For example, Darwin points out, “It is notorious that man is constructed on the same general type or model as other mammals,” noting the similar morphology of different species’ skeletons and “internal viscera,” and continues, “The brain, the most important of all the organs, follows the same law, as shewn by Huxley and other anatomists” (*DM* 178). These statements follow the logic of natural selection, as these similarities suggest that humans and animals share a past common ancestor, and that current differences are a result of adaptations accumulated over time. Darwin argues, further, that humans not only have physical qualities in common with animals, but mental as well: as he notably explains, “Many kinds of monkeys have a strong taste for tea, coffee, and spiritous liquors; they will also, as I have myself seen, smoke tobacco with pleasure” (*DM* 179). More generally, he states, “The lower animals, like man, manifestly feel pleasure and pain” (*DM* 214) and “Most of the more complex emotions are common to the higher animals and ourselves” (*DM* 216). Darwin also conducts an extended exploration of animals’ intellectual capacities (*DM* 216-22), including what he calls their “rude process of reasoning” (*DM* 220). By drawing attention to these qualities, Darwin stresses that the physical similarities between humans and animals are not merely coincidental, or limited to the material, as humans can trace all the qualities that shape their existence as present, in various ways, in other forms. His special emphasis on the “brain,” quoted above, and emotional and intellectual faculties subtly challenge the assumption of humans’—specifically white men’s—unique mental attributes, an assumption often used to question the possibility of human evolution; rather, according to Darwin, both the physical apparatus itself, the brain, and the more abstract qualities of intoxication, emotions, and intellect are not unique to humans, and thus cannot be used as evidence for human distinction. Consequently, Darwin’s argument strongly implies the shared descent of all living beings, and by extension, suggests that humans, rather than standing apart, belong to a collective materiality. Mel Y. Chen notes how the figure of the animal affects definitions of the human and boundaries within the human: “When many axes of human difference collide, the stakes heighten; if the animal figure mediates many of these axes, then it becomes a condensed and explosive discursive site. These crises of humanity-with-animality are concerned with borders and attractions” (100).

In a nineteenth-century Western context that highly valued the unique human rationality seen as underlying exploration, industry, and progress, the notion that, from a scientific viewpoint, humans did not necessarily possess any clear distinguishing characteristics was frightening. The disquieting implications of human evolution are elaborated by Rachels, who argues, “Darwin’s earliest readers realized that an evolutionary outlook might undermine the traditional doctrine of human dignity, a doctrine which is at the core of Western morals,” and so, “Discrediting ‘human dignity’ is one of the most important implications of Darwinism” (79-80). As shown above, “human dignity”—in other words, the notion that humans singularly possess powers of reasoning and morality—was disturbed, even “discredited,” by Darwinism because his elaboration of human evolution suggested that humans could not necessarily claim reason as their distinguishing attribute. Humans’ resemblance to animals, and their susceptibility to the material effects of evolutionary change, unsettled religious belief and, more broadly, modernity’s confidence in its rational mastery of nature. This was especially unsettling, and perhaps ironic, because scientific authority was behind these suggestions. Indeed, Darwin emphasizes these points, arguing, “Spiritual powers cannot be compared or classed by the naturalist,” and, in response to the idea of classifying humans apart from the animal kingdom, “A difference in degree, however great, does not justify us in placing man in a distinct kingdom” (*DM* 223). Darwin acknowledges that “spirituality,” however defined, may distinguish humans from animals—however, this quality, unlike physical traits, emotional expression, or mental capacities, cannot be observed or measured scientifically, and so should not bear upon scientific mappings of the human. Moreover, his assertion that there is no “justification” for placing “man” apart from animals encapsulates his argument and its implications, as this makes clear that evolutionary theory, on the whole, refutes assumptions of human uniqueness and instead figures humanity as part of a larger animal continuum. In this statement, Darwin stresses the significant point that the difference between humans and animals is of “degree,” not of type.

Therefore, the idea that humans evolved from lower animals profoundly challenged the “human” as a stable entity and henceforth disturbed the confidence of the modern West. Richter elaborates this anxiety in her discussion of the late nineteenth-century fascination with “the missing link,”[[18]](#footnote-18) arguing that the missing link “functions as a device that negotiates the area of post-Darwinian anthropological anxiety by foregrounding the precariousness of the human-animal boundary” (60), and so, due to its liminal position, it “undermines the signifying processes operating in the dichotomies culture vs. nature, civilization vs. barbarism, human vs. animal” and “disable[s] man from assuming a position outside of, or superior to, nature” (61). The missing link—and apes, more generally—became a potent image of Darwin’s emphasis on the slippery line between humans and animals and humans’ vulnerability to their own organic constitution. Likewise, Seitler focuses on the concept of “atavism” in turn-of-the-century literary and visual texts as expressing this anxiety, explaining, “Opposed to the imagined sovereignty of the human, atavism, the eternal recurrence of the animal, erupts as a potent flash of natural history that insists on recognition of a more complex kinship web” (30). The evolutionist rendering of the human disturbed anthropocentric “sovereignty,” as it pointed to “kinship” with, or descent from, “the animal.” This idea provoked fear because “atavism threatens a resurgence of the prehuman past and, therefore, an implosion of the modern world” (Seitler 24). By articulating humans’ kinship with animals, Darwin unsettled supposedly firm boundaries and drew attention to the ambiguous spaces of prehistoric descent, thus imperiling modern civilization’s presumed mastery of nature. Evolutionist classifications of race attempted to gloss over these ambiguities by aligning evolution with hierarchical schemes of the human along lines of descent.

In their texts, Darwin, and especially Huxley, acknowledge this anxiety and attempt to ease it by stressing a teleological narrative of evolution. Darwin, in concluding his argument for man’s descent from lower forms, states that from primates, “at a remote period, Man, the wonder and glory of the Universe, proceeded” (*DM* 229). While Darwin emphasizes evolutionary kinship, the rhetorical move in this quotation demonstrates how he frames his account in a linear timeline that positions “Man” as the apex of organic development on Earth. Indeed, the idea that man is the “glory” of the whole “Universe” suggests that human superiority is transcendent. Through this framing, Darwin leaves little doubt about man’s superior position, and so mitigates his argument’s potential undermining of human dignity. Similarly, Huxley rhetorically anticipates the disquieting provocation of his argument. In his text, Huxley aims to demonstrate the kinship between humans and animals, using anatomical comparisons between the brains and skulls of humans and apes as his primary evidence. Huxley’s brain comparisons strongly influenced Darwin’s argument for human evolution, as shown by Darwin’s reference to Huxley, above. Huxley’s demonstration of human and animal similitude also elicited the same potential anxieties that Richter identifies in the missing link.

Notably, Huxley points out the irony of his project: “It is as if nature herself had foreseen the arrogance of man, and with Roman severity had provided that his intellect, by its very triumphs, should call into prominence the slaves, admonishing the conqueror that he is but dust” (*Man’s Place* 98). This quotation demonstrates the racialized and gendered tensions inherent to nineteenth-century biology’s endeavor to uncover human origins. Laura Doyle observes, “The insistent nineteenth-century repetition of images of science ‘unveiling’ a half-clothed Nature…represents the attempt to control this tenuous balance between intimacy with and invasive power over Nature” (67). While scientific discourse was viewed as a form of mastery via the mapping of nature, this very procedure also revealed human material vulnerability. Anxiety over human-animal kinship exposed this tension and Huxley’s quotation confronts this threat. He admits that the physical evidence of this kinship compels man’s “arrogance” to be humbled, and by figuring “nature” as a “severe” teacher reprimanding humans, notes our unavoidable interdependence with material forces. Yet Huxley’s metaphor of the “conqueror” and “slaves” also reveals persistent modern confidence in rational mastery, as this metaphor, despite the conqueror being “admonished,” rests on the assumption of the scientist “conquering” nature, which remains a lowly “slave” in comparison; this metaphor is positioned alongside Huxley’s description of the human “intellect” as “triumphant,” which further frames scientific endeavors as procedures of rational mastery. By extension, Huxley’s articulation of this inherent tension between rationality and materiality emphasizes that while the elaboration of human origins is humbling, humans—specifically, white men, as implied by his discourse of civilization—remain superior and in control.

Huxley further negotiates potential unease and human self-assurance in the concluding interpretation of his skull measurements, writing,

I have endeavored to show that no absolute structural line of demarcation, wider than that between the animals that immediately succeed us in the scale, can be drawn between the animal world and ourselves; and I may add the expression of my belief that the attempt to draw a psychical distinction is equally futile, and that even the highest faculties of feeling and of intellect begin to germinate in lower forms of life. At the same time, no one is more strongly convinced than I am of the vastness of the gulf between civilized man and the brutes; or is more certain that whether *from* them or not, he is assuredly not *of* them. (*Man’s Place* 102, emphases original)

Huxley, like Darwin, moves from emphasizing human kinship with animals to offering reassurance of human superiority. By stating that no “structural line of demarcation” exists between humans and animals, Huxley stresses the blurry border between the human and the animal and argues that human-animal difference exists in degrees, not absolutes. Huxley thereby suggests that the “human” as a stable entity is not fixed, which he further supports in his assertion that there is no definite “psychical distinction” and that the “highest faculties of feeling and of intellect” are far from exclusive to humans.

However, Huxley strongly tempers these statements in his next sentence. Significantly, while Huxley qualifies his preceding statements with “I have endeavored to show” and “the expression of my belief,” he begins his next statement with the more emphatic phrasing “no one is more strongly convinced than I am,” and so draws special attention to this statement. He continues that a “vast gulf” exists between “civilized man” and the “brutes” (i.e., animals), and further stresses that man is not “*of*” the “brutes.” Several features are important here. While Huxley argues that there is no “absolute” line between humans and animals, he nevertheless insists that a “vast” gulf separates them, assuring the reader that, due to this gulf, “man” retains singular status. Along with this, Huxley specifies that “civilized” man possesses this status—this delineates civilized (i.e., white) man as a unique type, distinct in his distance from “brute” animals. Intrinsic to this delineation is a concept of “civilization” as, in the words of Robert J.C. Young, “fundamentally a comparative concept that took on its meaning as the end-point in an historical view of the advancement of humanity” which, post-Enlightenment, “became part of a general European interpretation of the history of the world” (32). Huxley’s situating civilized man as particularly distant from animals hence creates a gap in which “uncivilized” humans can be positioned as more closely related to animals.

Moreover, Huxley’s final assertion that man is “*from*” the animals, but not “*of*” them, engages with a teleological logic: while man descends from animals, he has developed to such an extent that he does not belong with them. Together with the previous sentence, Huxley makes it clear that “civilization,” or rationality and industry, is the factor setting man apart, and the further a given human group (i.e., the “civilized”) progresses away *from* animals, the higher it is on the scale from base materiality to human rational mastery. Maria Lugones explains how, in this context, the human-animal boundary reinforces racializing logic: “I understand the dichotomous hierarchy between the human and the non-human as the central dichotomy of colonial modernity…This distinction became a mark of the human and a mark of civilization” (743). This logic can be traced in Huxley’s writing as well: he glosses over human kinship with animals, rendering it acceptable by mobilizing singularity via civilization. In turn, this positioning of civilized man as uniquely distinct from the animals creates a gap for the positioning of uncivilized, or savage and racialized, man as sharing more direct descent with nonhuman animals, his lineage distinct from more advanced civilized man.

Thus these early evolutionist texts situate race as an attribute distinguishing the civilized from the savage, or the human from the less-than-human, opening the door for later, more blatantly racist appropriations of the evolutionist paradigm. Stepan shows how the discursive logic of early evolutionist arguments accommodated European notions of racial hierarchy. She explains, “By as early as the late 1860s, scientists embracing evolution found that…evolutionary thought was compatible with the idea of the fixity, antiquity, and hierarchy of human races. Far from dislodging old racial ideas, evolution strengthened them, and provided them with a new scientific vocabulary of struggle and survival” (48-49). Evolutionary theory posited that organic complexity developed via “survival” and successful propagation. In a transatlantic context of colonialism and enslavement, survival and propagation were viewed as means of conquest by human groups over other groups, a paradigm which in turn could support racial difference as an inextricable hierarchy.

Stepan draws attention to how the “lower races” or “savages” were crucial figures in Darwin’s argument for human-animal kinship. As stated above, Darwin highlights common mental and physical traits between humans and animals to support his argument. Several of these comparisons are revealing in their invocations of human racial difference. For example, in arguing for animals’ rational capacities, he describes the behavior of an elephant and a bear, and implores, “Now, what is the difference between such actions, when performed by an uncultivated man, and by one of the higher animals?” (*DM* 220). Darwin continues this line of reasoning: “A savage, as well as a dog, would search [for water] in the same way, though frequently disappointed; and in both it seems to be equally an act of reason, whether or not any general proposition on the subject is consciously placed before the mind” (*DM* 220). The “savage” or “uncultivated man,”[[19]](#footnote-19) then, functions as a relay, or distancing mechanism, between the “higher animals” and “civilized man.” The similarity of the savage’s reasoning capacities with elephants and dogs demonstrates human descent from animals, yet at the same time, his position in the evolutionary scheme slips toward the level of these animals, as he is incapable of extrapolating any “general proposition,” or conclusion, about his surroundings. Hence, the savage is positioned in the liminal space between humans and animals, linking them, yet set apart from the fully human. Chen explains that the link between race and animality is “built upon many complex animacy hierarchies” (35) and further notes, “axes of human difference are imposed on the bodies of animals, and those of animal difference are thrust onto the bodies of humans, differences which repeat and repeat” (100). This procedure is evident in the above quotation, as the savage is rendered less “animate” or sentient in terms of his reasoning capacities. By animating the savage, or racialized subject, as a parallel to the non-human animal, Darwin enacts an evolutionist framework in which animal and human difference become entangled with each other and then realigned in racial hierarchies.

Darwin follows a similar logic in his comparison of physical traits. He observes that humans have retained a sense of smell, albeit weakened due to lessened utility, and then says, “the sense of smell is of extremely slight service, if any, even to the dark colored races of men, in whom it is much more highly developed than in the white and civilized races” (187). While he acknowledges that these “dark colored races” remain distinct from animals, Darwin nevertheless positions these “races” as more animalistic in their senses, hence signaling categorical difference between the “dark” and “white” races. Stepan analyzes this argumentative strategy and its implications for race,

Darwin’s use of the ‘lower’ races, while obviously reflective of the racial ideas of his period, had little to do with overt racism *per se*…His use of the scale of human races was a function, rather, of the type of argument he was making. That argument was one of continuity…from animal forms. But the argument for continuity led, almost inevitably, to the use of the lower races to fill the gap between animals and man. Later, scientists would find it only too easy to interpret Darwin as meaning that the races of man now formed an evolutionary scale. (55)

Stepan therefore illuminates the role of race in the *Descent*. She points out that “the lower races” were used “to fill the gap between animals and man,” a move clearly evident in the above quotations. Stepan’s note about how “the argument for continuity” engaged with this racializing logic highlights the tension between kinship and hierarchy inherent to evolutionary theory. In arguing for the interconnections of organic lifeforms, early evolutionist discourse articulated a timeline that positioned these relations in terms of hierarchical descent, situating racialized human bodies as more closely akin to animal bodies, and the white masculine body as unique in its distance from lower material forms. Racialized bodies became a distancing mechanism between material animality and presumed white superiority. Moreover, the naturalization of racial difference enables the dominant view of racial oppression as inevitable, as reflected by Haraway’s claim, “Race as a natural-technical object of knowledge is fundamentally a category marking political power through location in ‘nature’” (*Primate* 153).

My attention to this tension between kinship and hierarchy in Darwin and Huxley demonstrates how the vast array of differences in organic and human life became fixed in a taxonomic hierarchy via the evolutionist linear timeline. Seitler notes the centrality of kin relations in this framework, as she argues, “produced as both a temporal and racial category…kinship becomes the means to mark inequality between social and racial groups based on the measure of each group’s ability to progress over time in the evolutionary, reproductive sense” (151). Ironically, relations between beings are collapsed into divisions, their links restructured as borders. McClintock also notes how kinship and hierarchy became intertwined in evolutionary racism, explaining how the logic of the evolutionist “Family of Man” rests on an understanding of patriarchy as the natural form of family, and thus, “The family image came to figure *hierarchy within unity* as an organic element of historical progress, and thus became indispensable for legitimizing exclusion and hierarchy within nonfamilial social forms such as nationalism, liberal individualism and imperialism” (45, emphasis original). McClintock’s “hierarchy within unity” provides a valuable trope for understanding how the evolutionist paradigm rationalized racial division as an outcome of descent, thereby validating racist, colonialist social structures. Moreover, her identification of the patriarchal logic underlying this hierarchal division shows how gendered norms inexorably participate in this framework, and why the white masculine subject, in particular, became figured as the ostensible head of evolutionary development. Therefore, the radicalism of recognizing man’s descent from animals was tempered and realigned as hierarchy. Darwin’s and Huxley’s degrees of relations between animals, racialized humans, and white civilized humans display how the evolutionist narrative of man’s descent from lower animals became a means of categorically situating human groups as occupying progressive scales of superior or inferior descent.

Engaging with this rearticulation of relations as hierarchy and spurred by their interest in the Darwinian narrative of evolutionary progress, nineteenth-century scientists and anthropologists sought the origins of racial difference. This inquiry presumed racial difference as intrinsic and ontological and viewed this innate difference as the result of distinct lines of ancestry. These scientists’ focus on questions of monogenesis and polygenesis exemplifies how this nineteenth-century discourse stabilized racial hierarchy as the form and function of evolutionary descent. According to Amigoni, this was “the question that dominated physical anthropology throughout the nineteenth century: were human races descended from a common progenitor (monogenesis), or were they derived from a multiplicity of different stocks (polygenesis)?” (106). The concept of polygenesis is grounded in a view of race as biologically determining one’s being, as Stepan explains, “Polygenists argued that the different races of man were so different from each other in their physical, mental and moral attributes as to form not mere varieties of one single species, but instead several distinct biological species of their own” (29). While the idea of polygenesis predated Darwin (Stepan 99), it was reinvigorated by the popular understanding of evolution as a linear narrative of struggle and progress.

Darwin’s and Huxley’s implicit animalization of the racialized subject resonates with the idea of the human races constituting “distinct biological species.” Although Darwin and Huxley identified race as differences of degree, their elaborations provided a foundation for scientific explanations of race as species difference. Indeed, Darwin equivocates about whether human races constitute species or varieties. In a revealing passage, he states,

Since he attained the rank of manhood, [man] has diverged into distinct races, or as they may be more fitly called, sub-species. Some of these, such as the Negro and European, are so distinct that, if specimens had been brought to a naturalist without any further information, they would undoubtedly have been considered by him as good and true species. Nevertheless all the races agree in so many unimportant details of structure and in so many mental peculiarities that these can be accounted for only by inheritance from a common progenitor; and a progenitor thus characterized would probably deserve to rank as man. (*DM* 245)

Despite Darwin’s ultimate conclusion, suggestions of race as species difference are clearly evident in this quotation. The term “sub-species” connotes the taxonomic divisions of species and provokes interpretations of race as an inextricable distinction, closer to species than to variety. In the next sentence, Darwin further emphasizes the supposed depth of racial difference. By invoking the hypothetical naturalist, Darwin appeals to scientific authority as objectively delineating racial divisions and determining these divisions as so self-evident that “species” becomes a legitimate possibility. Notably, Darwin refers to the “Negro” and the “European” as most clearly representing this difference, thus contributing to discourse that animates the black subject as less than human and as the negative of civilized Europe. However, Darwin follows these racist gestures with acknowledgment that, ultimately, the races share enough traits that they arise from a “common progenitor”—he endorses monogenesis and validates the races as belonging to the same species.

As with his discussion of animal and human continuity, Darwin simultaneously recognizes collectivity and participates in racist discourse. Yet, in this particular quotation his acknowledgment of the races as one species is quite ambivalent, as shown by his use of “undoubtedly” when discussing the naturalist’s opinion of different species, in contrast to using “probably” in surmising a “common progenitor.” Monogenist thinking, then, was not necessarily an equitable alternative to polygenesis, and indeed, the lines between these modes of thought wavered. Indeed, Stepan notes that “Huxley saw evolution as reconciling the best arguments of the monogenists with modern polygenism—mankind was one but racial types were old and stable” (79). Therefore, the mono/polygenist question shows not only how the idea of evolutionist development could be mobilized to figure the races as a hierarchy of species, but also how the evolutionist paradigm enabled possible reconciliation of these theories, in which racial difference could be viewed as originating deep in the evolutionary past, and hence, as relatively fixed. Indeed, this notion of racial differences originating in the remote past is suggested by Darwin: “We may infer that the races of men were differentiated, as far as sexual selection is concerned, in chief part at a very remote epoch; and this conclusion throws light on the remarkable fact that at the most ancient period, of which we have as yet any record, the races of men had already come to differ nearly or quite as much as they do at the present day” (*DM* 243). These questions of racial origins, then, are revealing in their conception of race as intrinsic difference, and in their appeal to descent, via the perpetuation of racial difference from a distant past, as determining racial status.

This evolutionist view of contemporary human races as the result of ancient divisions in the human family thus supported, even reinforced, the view of the races as stable types. Harriet Ritvo argues that, while Darwinian evolution ostensibly refutes the notion of species as fixed essences, and indeed, highlights the difficulties of strict species classifications, these ideas nevertheless became incorporated into the already well-established Western scientific preoccupation with taxonomy. According to Ritvo, “The notion that species were somehow real—that, in labeling a group of organisms with a latinate binomial, taxonomists were acknowledging it as an entity that had existence independent of the naming process—still persisted” (53) and so, “the practice of taxonomy did not in fact need to change much to accommodate” Darwin’s ideas (64). This claim is also supported by Stepan, who explains,

By thinking of races as fixed and categorical units…evolutionary scientists unwittingly endorsed the idea of fixed types that had been a part of biology for so long. Instead of treating races as arbitrary divisions of populations in which many traits arise independently of each other as a result of selective pressures, it was easier to see human races as discrete units which were relatively unchanging, or if changing, units in which traits varied together in racial packages. (86)

The idea of evolution became comprehensible via its absorption into the taxonomic imperative, which illuminates how the evolutionist paradigm enabled hierarchizing racist discourse. Just as a given species became a “real,” or objective, “entity,” so racial groups, rather than fluctuating variations, became biological essences and thus “discrete units,” or types, each with its own inherent traits. Lugones highlights the mutual entanglement of taxonomic epistemology and racial and gender hierarchies, arguing, “Modernity organizes the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogenous, separable categories,” and thereby, she locates “categorial [*sic*], dichotomous, hierarchical logic as central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality” (742). Evolutionist theory participated in, and became an authoritative resource for, a view of racial difference as marking one’s ancestral belonging to developed or less-developed human groups, groups organized into a typology.

Evolutionist thought as the logic underlying modern racial hierarchy thus constitutes a form of biopolitical discourse. Regarding modern biological racism, Michel Foucault identifies it as “primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die” (254), and further explains,

[Racism] is, in short, a way of establishing a biological-type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain. This will allow power to treat that population as a mixture of races, or to be more accurate, to treat the species, to subdivide the species it controls, into the subspecies known, precisely, as races. That is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower. (255)

Foucault’s explanation sheds light on the significance of Darwin’s equivocation, above, regarding the races as species and, moreover, shows how designations of race grounded in biological types attain power. In addition, according to Weheliye, “The barring of subjects that belong to the Homo sapiens species from the jurisdiction of humanity depends upon the workings of racialization (differentiation) and racism (hierarchization and exclusion); in fact the two are often indistinguishable” (72). In other words, conceiving the races as categorically different and the white race as most fully developed (i.e., least animalistic) is what makes racial hierarchy possible and comprehensible.

The ambiguities in the influential evolutionist arguments of Darwin and Huxley, particularly the tensions between kinship as a collective link and kinship as hierarchal division, gave way to a logic of evolution in which one’s descent and implied position in the evolutionist narrative of progress determined one’s belonging to a fixed racial type. Human physical characteristics, evaluated by the scientific gaze, marked one’s position in this racial taxonomy of descent. Therefore, assessing the visual became a key mechanism for categorizing a human subject’s position in the human-animal scale. Skin color, in particular, is prioritized as designating racial type, particularly between white and black, as Darwin’s quotation, above, about the clear distinctions between the white and black races clearly illustrates. Skin color was used as a marker of race in part because, as Stepan explains, “Color was a traditional and convenient criterion of race, not the least because…it did not require the permission of the individual for it to be assessed by the anthropologist, while measurement did” (96).

Moreover, the physical trait of skin color was linked to ideas of civilization and progress. Young explains that the prominent nineteenth-century ethnologist James Cowles Prichard “posited that the first people had been black and identified the cause of subsequent whiteness as civilization itself,” and “White skin therefore became both a marker of civilization and a product of it” (35). Just as Darwin’s and Huxley’s discourse reveals how evolutionist ideas of teleological progress toward European civilization reinforced the animalization of the racialized subject, so the assumed distinguishing mark of racial difference—skin color—functioned as a sign of deficient civilization, i.e., primitivism. Racism as predicated upon stable, biologically essential types thus constitutes a circular logic: physical difference signals inferiority, and inferiority stems from physical difference. This rationalization recalls Bruno Latour’s statements regarding scientific observation and mediation: “In themselves, facts are mute; natural forces are brute mechanisms. Yet the scientists declare that they themselves are not speaking; rather facts speak for themselves” (28-29) and in this way, “Little groups of gentlemen take testimony from natural forces, and they testify to each other that they are not betraying but translating the silent behavior of objects” (29). Scientific mediation is “invisible” (Latour 29) because it is viewed as the translation of self-evident “objects.” In the evolutionist framework of race, the characteristic of skin color renders some subjects as objects, since their physical traits are objectified as legible markers of innate inferiority, which in turn renders them “silent” and dehumanized. Weheliye calls the reliance upon the visual as supposedly self-evident “scopic differentiation” (72). In this way, the logic of race as marking one’s descent from a primitive branch of the evolutionist timeline becomes fixed to skin color, along with other physical traits, as immediately comprehensible, self-explanatory evidence of categorical essences.

## Instruments of Maternity: Sexual Selection and Women

In focusing on the evolutionist configuration of racial difference, I have shown how nineteenth-century concepts of progressive development and rationality underlie the idea that nonwhite races, particularly the black race, are not as “developed” as the white race and thus inferior. The evolutionist demarcation of gender differences, in a similar way, situates women as inferior by viewing them as underdeveloped in comparison to men. Rita Felski explains that nineteenth-century “scientific, anthropological, and historical texts” claimed “women’s affinity with a premodern condition” (39), or in other words, an unevolved or uncivilized condition. The idea of women and nonwhite races as less-developed is called “paedomorphism” (Laura Doyle 65) and suggests that, as evolutionary discourses rationalized white masculine superiority, they aligned race and gender as parallels. In other key respects, however, the evolutionist understanding of sex and gender difference is quite distinct from its delineation of racial difference. Rather than a scale, the man-woman relation takes shape as a binary in which women’s reproductive and maternal capacities take center stage. Following this, descent also bears upon the evolutionist configuration of gender—women are the material bearers of the different races. This idea of race as reproduced through descent is exemplified by white turn-of-the-century transatlantic degeneration fears. These degeneration fears imagined that interracial reproduction would pollute the white race and occasion its backward regression to a lower, less-evolved state (Seitler 139-40; Russett 67). This concept of degeneration, then, with its fear of backward movement, was clearly embedded in an evolutionist framework. It also illuminates how, in the dominant evolutionist scheme of race and gender, these two categories collided as the material inferiors to rational masculinity but, at the same time, diverged in their consequences for the sexuality and maternity of white and nonwhite women.

Darwin’s explication of sexual selection in *The Descent of Man* derives from two linked questions that arise from his argument regarding humans’ evolution from animals: how to account for the development of first, racial difference, and second, sexual differentiation, that is, secondary sexual characteristics that appear to serve no survival function (175-76). Darwin’s introduction of these two questions as the origin of his sexual selection theory is notable because it demonstrates how, in his biological scheme, racial and sexual difference are innately linked, yet at the same time, distinctive in their structure and function. Darwin defines “sexual selection” as “depend[ing] on the advantage which certain individuals have over others of the same sex and species solely in respect of reproduction” (*DM* 230). In other words, while natural selection has to do with traits which give the advantage of survival, thereby allowing individuals to pass these traits on to their offspring, sexual selection is focused more specifically on reproduction itself (i.e., the hereditary transmission of traits) and how, beyond survival, individuals have advantages which make them more competitive as potential sexual partners. Sexual selection, then, is concerned with how sexuality and reproduction function in terms of the development of the species. Given this concern, sexual difference and corporeality, as well as maternity, lead to sex and gender—womanhood in particular—as key matters in this process.

Darwin, moreover, views sexual selection as a primary cause of racial differentiation, arguing that, “If any change [in inherited characteristics] has thus been effected, it is almost certain that the different races would be differently modified, as each has its own standard of beauty” (*DM* 239). According to this reasoning, sexual attraction results in racial differences, because the races are so biologically distinct that their “standards of beauty” differ, which in turn leads to the development of greater differences. While this logic, to a present-day reader, is clearly faulty in its circularity, this explanation illustrates how the concept of descent underlies the evolutionist understanding of both racial difference and sex difference.

Turn-of-the-century evolutionist storytelling places white man at the apex of organic development, a hierarchical logic which, in turn, links women and/or people of color as less developed and hence innately inferior. In his cataloging of sex differentiation, Darwin makes clear this assumed correlation, as he states, “It is generally admitted that with woman the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man; but some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization” (234). Darwin locates the “lower” races’ supposed sensuous capabilities as evidence of past animality and hence distance from masculine reason, and here, he applies similar logic to “woman,” viewing her stereotypical “intuition” capabilities—i.e., her stronger emotions—as a sign of her underdevelopment. In other words, woman’s lack of reason relative to man’s reveals her underdeveloped status. This idea of woman as “undeveloped” inspired turn-of-the-century scientists and social theorists, who further extended this idea in their elaborations of woman’s inherent difference from—and hence inferiority to—man. This is shown most clearly by Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson, who claim in *The Evolution of Sex* (1889), “From the earliest ages philosophers have contended that woman is but an undeveloped man…In short, Darwin’s man is as it were an evolved woman, and [Herbert] Spencer’s woman an arrested man” (qtd. in Beer 200).[[20]](#footnote-20) While the distinction between Darwin and Spencer’s views here is interesting, this quotation is, for my purposes, significant in its explicit assurance of woman’s underdeveloped status and of (white) “man” as the measure of development. Though scientific and sociological discourses varied in their explanations, they largely agreed that this underdevelopment is due to the female reproductive organs’ drainage of women’s energy (Russett 91). Therefore, just as the distinguishing marks of race were read as evidence of less-developed inferiority, so reproduction, the main distinguishing feature of womanhood, constituted her inferiority.

This association between women and people of color as constituting the less-developed portion of humanity was called “paedomorphism,” as I mentioned above. According to Laura Doyle, “paedomorphism aligned all women with the ‘lower races’ by suggesting that both embodied the childhood of humanity…Certain races and the female sex represent, in this theory, ‘older’ evolutionary forms beyond which other ‘younger’ races and the male sex have evolved” (65), an idea which she also discusses in relation to the above quotation from Darwin. The theory of paedomorphism, then, used the evolutionary story to explain human difference and variety. According to this logic, any deviation from the ideal human form—white maleness—is by default inferior and warrants an explanation for its origins. The scale of progress from simple to complex in the *Origin*, along with its popularization as a teleological narrative, provides a temporal blueprint upon which these differences of inferiority can be positioned and explained.

However, while it is important to show how racial and sexual differences are treated similarly within this overall logic, as this illuminates the hegemonic way in which white masculinity is positioned as the unique apex of human development, it is also clear that in the evolutionist story, these differences are not directly analogous. In fact, identifying the distinct ways in which race and sex are constituted in the evolutionary story helps to reveal the specific means by which biology—as the study of organic processes and of embodiment—is discursively used as the explanation of human difference and the hierarchical structures this entails. As my analysis of literary responses to Darwinian theory shows, evolutionist hierarchical structuring of sexed and racialized bodies does not yield a smooth parallel. The distinctions between how these bodies are positioned in this scheme enables closer attention toward analyzing and addressing biological justifications of misogyny and racism. In the quotation, above, in which Darwin characterizes women’s “intuition” as similar to that of the “lower races,” his use of “but” is noteworthy. Within the context of this passage, this quotation occurs at the end of Darwin’s cataloging of inherent sex differences. He characterizes women as having “greater tenderness” and “maternal instincts,” and notes that this is true “even with savages” (234). Likewise, he highlights man’s aggression and “ambition” as his “natural birthright,” implying that this is also true of savage men (234). So, Darwin views these innate sex differences as transcending racial boundaries—in this sense, white women and “savage” women share more similarities than white men and women share with each other. This therefore explains his “but,” as Darwin shifts from the dichotomy of gender differences to the idea that women, at least in some sense, share “past” instincts with the lower races. However, as his elaboration of other distinguishing features indicates, this common state of underdevelopment is not the only cause of women’s inferiority. While it is certainly a key factor, it has less to do with belonging to a kinship group of descent that ceased evolving in the past, but rather with reproduction, her functional role in relation to man, as indicated by Darwin’s attention to the “maternal instinct” as a quality shared by all women. This logic is made clear in Darwin’s elaboration of sexual selection.

In fact, Darwin’s emphasis on sexual selection reveals how sexual dimorphism, as a binary, renders the man-woman relation unique from racial relations in the evolutionist story. Most simply, woman is an inferior counterpoint to man, while the races are arranged in a scale. As the above quotation about the races’ different “standards of beauty” shows, in this story, woman, regardless of race, is an object of sexual attraction and the implicit corporeal bearer of future generations; the races, meanwhile, are conceived more broadly, as biologically discrete groups. Therefore, racial groups result from sexual choices and are solidified in branches of descent, while women are essential participants in evolutionary processes. This participation, in Darwin’s view, necessitates women’s sexual objectification and reproductive instrumentalization, which conveniently reflects nineteenth-century views of women’s primary roles in society. Darwin thus differentiates women from men in terms of this gendered functioning and identifies sexual selection as the mechanism of this difference. Indeed, in constructing his argument for sexual selection, Darwin enumerates the supposedly innate differences between the sexes, which are, in turn, evidence of sexual selection. Interestingly, Darwin describes sex difference as the consequence of gradual development from a singular, nondifferentiated form, as he notes, “Some remote progenitor of the whole vertebrate kingdom appears to have been hermaphrodite or androgynous” (*DM* 226). Sex difference, then, is similar to the development of species in the evolutionist scheme, as it results from an original unity. By presenting sex difference in this way, Darwin shows its necessity for survival and reproduction, and in a move that held potential appeal for feminists, presents an opportunity for thinking of sex difference not as intrinsic or ontologically stable, but rather as constitutive of a whole.[[21]](#footnote-21)

However, Darwin’s argument is firmly embedded in a dichotomy of traditional gender roles. Darwin argues, “Man is more powerful in body and mind than woman… therefore it is not surprising that he should have gained the power of selection. Women are everywhere conscious of the value of their own beauty; and when they have the means, they take more delight in decorating themselves with all sorts of ornaments than do men” (*DM* 242). This enumeration of sex difference supports Darwin’s earlier claim about human sexual selection, “these characters [of men’s strength] would, however, have been preserved or even augmented during the long ages of man’s savagery, by the success of the strongest and boldest men, both in the general struggle for life and in their contests for wives” (*DM* 234). According to this argument, then, men are characteristically strong as a result of this trait enabling them to gain wives and to pass on these traits, while women, in remaining passive, have developed “beauty” as a distinguishing characteristic and preoccupation, enabling them to attract men and maternally bear the species. In this way, Darwin provides a biological basis for Victorian gender norms, and moreover, identifies reproduction as both the motivation, and the mechanism, of this difference.

As in his account of human racial difference, Darwin emphasizes the intensity of this difference, as he states, “The modifications acquired through sexual selection are often so strongly pronounced that the two sexes have frequently been ranked as distinct species” (*DM* 250). Darwin is rather hedging in his treatment of difference here: while evolutionary development means that a singular origin is behind these differences—which can thus imply an underlying equality—he makes sure to stress that, presently, the distinction between men and women is so great that it overshadows similarities. As with his likening different racial groups to different species, Darwin uses the implications of the term “species” (especially as it is used within his own evolutionary framework) to highlight these differences as so marked that they compel categorization. Ironically, while in terms of racial difference this comparison suggests the color line as something not to be transgressed via sexual intercourse, in relation to gender, this line of difference must be crossed via intercourse for the perpetuation of the species itself. This distinction helps to clarify how the notion of “species” in relation to human beings underlies hegemonic inscriptions of race and sex: the borders of race are not to be crossed, and each race conceives itself as a “species” that is perpetuated by women’s sexuality and corporeality. In this view, men and women exist in a binary relationship in which one cannot be confused with the other and the species’ future depends on the maintenance of these differences. Darwin, therefore, presents an argument which figures the preservation of sex differences as imperative for the reproductive future of the human species, an argument which other male scientists and social thinkers gladly followed.

As this discussion has thus far suggested, Darwin’s articulation of sexual selection depends upon a logic that situates sexual activity as intrinsically bound to reproduction. In this view, reproduction is the ultimate goal of relations between men and women and of life itself. This emphasis is clarified by Darwin’s inclusion, in *The Descent*, of a quotation from philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer stating, “the final aim of all love intrigues, be they comic or tragic, is really of more importance than all other ends in human life. What it all turns upon is nothing less than the composition of the next generation…It is not the weal or woe of any one individual, but that of the human race to come, which is here at stake” (qtd. in 240). This quotation stresses how, in the evolutionary narrative, sexual and reproductive activity function in service to a greater goal, which subsumes any individual concerns—whether “comic” or “tragic,” the interests of “love” are immaterial in light of the larger significance for the “race,” or the species. Sexual pleasure is not an aim in itself, but rather a means to the “end” of reproduction, a goal to which individual choices and actions are subordinate. By emphasizing the “stake” of the human race on successful reproduction, women are incorporated as a mass of embodied material for this task: bodies to attract masculine insemination and to bear the future of the race. Darwin does not ignore men’s role in the reproductive perpetuation of the species, and so it could be argued that he does not explicitly identify women as the main propagators of the race. However, the configuration of women as the locus of human (and racial) reproduction is the clear grounding of his statements, so embedded as to be not worth stating directly. This view is evident in the above quotations, in which Darwin describes the maternal instinct as a key characteristic of womanhood shared across racial lines; in addition, his affirmation of masculinity as active and femininity as passive enables the figuring of women as instruments of maternity.

Evolutionary theory, therefore, focuses on the biology of sex differentiation and women’s reproductive role in evolutionary development; these foci suggest how evolutionary ideas of linear progressive time, and the development and proliferation of material bodies through this linear time, situate the women’s body as instrumental. The issue of whether this instrumentalization objectifies the feminine body is interrelated with notions of racial descent, as this embodied function could be viewed as allowing white women an active stake in the evolutionist timeline, which I further discuss in Chapter 4. This concern with reproduction—as the crux of Darwinian sexual selection—also holds implications for the role of women’s sexuality. While Darwin’s elaboration of sexual selection may afford some agency to feminine sexuality, it is strictly in service to reproduction and the maternal role within the evolutionary narrative, thus provoking questions of how this biological framing of sexuality circumscribes feminine sexual expression.

*The Descent* also inspired subsequent biologists, social theorists, and sexologists to further explore the origins and functions of sex difference. Cynthia Eagle Russett notes, this “work became the source book for a generation and more of research in evolutionary psychology. It became, in addition, the starting point for a psychology of sex difference…Darwin’s treatment of mental distinctions between the sexes had behind it the immense prestige of his name. It set the terms for subsequent discussion” (40). As Russett’s attention to this text’s influence on psychology suggests, Darwin’s argument, examining as it does the motivations of sexual attraction and reproduction and how this apparently accounts for gender difference, blurred distinctions between psychological and biological imperatives, and accordingly, suggested sex difference (conceived of as both physiological and mental) as innate and functional. Russett indicates that, in “setting the terms for subsequent discussion,” Darwin’s elaboration of biological sex differences—especially his claim that women are naturally less intelligent than men (Russett 40-41)—provided a valid context for male scientists and thinkers to argue for women’s inferiority on the basis of biological or psychological “evidence.” However, the shifting of this debate to the scientific or empirical realm of logical evidence also provided a window for women to argue against the supposed immutability of masculine superiority. The potential social and cultural consequences of Darwin’s sexual selection theory for explaining human behavior and relationships, and for assigning meaning to biological difference, made this theory a rich source of interest for some feminists.

Darwin’s articulation of natural and sexual selection provided a foundation for popular understandings of evolution as a teleological narrative of human development directed toward its apex, white masculinity. The import of sexual selection—and of evolutionist accounts of sexual difference and relationships more generally—is rooted within this frame, as its prevailing concern with reproduction positions maternity as one of the crucial mechanisms of the perpetuation, and improvement, of the species. This goal-directed view of reproduction and maternity situates women as central participants in the evolutionary story. Indeed, Darwin’s explanation of sexual selection explicitly relies upon a logic of reproduction as the ultimate objective of human sexuality. At the same time, this story’s view of women as biologically underdeveloped limits their agency. Woman thus occupies an uneasy space within the evolutionary narrative—her seemingly powerful role is predetermined by its endpoint. This space becomes even more difficult with the question of racial difference, as reproduction is the mechanism by which lines of descent, the assumed boundaries of racial difference, are maintained, a framework which positions white women and women of color quite differently. Indeed, this difficulty is demonstrated by the fact that turn-of-the-century thinkers treated women and race groups as discrete categories. White feminists relied on this kind of implicit logic; as black feminist thinkers have shown,[[22]](#footnote-22) this categorical separation and the accompanying popular image of “woman” as white effectively erases the unique positioning of woman as color as bearing both racism and misogyny.

The assumed authority of Darwin and other male scientists to communicate the narrative of evolutionary progress suggests another key aspect of this narrative’s gendered dimensions. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the narrative of evolutionary progress figures rationality as the apex of development, which, due to its association with white masculinity, permits white male scientists like Darwin and turn-of-the-century thinkers to inscribe and articulate gendered and racialized bodies as inferior. Roof’s analysis of narrative shows how, in the nineteenth century, the concept of mastery—in other words, the full realization of knowledge—is part of the climax and reproduction matrix at the endpoint of narrative. Roof reads Freudian psychoanalysis, with its imperative toward self-knowledge, as a symptom of the nineteenth-century elevation of “knowledge” as the fruit at the end of storytelling. According to Roof, “in a post-Enlightenment scientific culture that believes that knowledge is the antidote to death,” Freudian psychoanalysis “exposes a cultural shift toward a coalition among knowledge, mastery, and ending” (12). This “coalition among knowledge, mastery, and ending” is clear in the evolutionist narrative of gendered and racial hierarchy in two ways: first, rational and empirical mastery has enabled European male scientists to comprehend and explain the processes of evolution, and second, the realization of this knowledge and mastery demonstrates that these white men have overcome brute animality and gained evolutionary ascendancy. In this way, knowledge is an “antidote to death” because, although death is part of the material engine of evolution, white masculinity has prevailed in the struggle for survival through its rational mastery; this is shown not only in the theory of natural selection, but in sexual selection theory as well, as Darwin argues that men developed their “strength” in their battles for mates.

The association between scientific rationalism and masculinity is a key component of the Western cultural ideology of science in the modern era. According to Jan Golinski, in the seventeenth century, “the normative practices of scientific observation were created through cultivation of the body as an objective instrument,” as shown by the writings and practices of Rene Descartes, Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and John Locke (139). The body became an “objective instrument”—an impartial observer and filterer of natural processes and events—through “restraint of the passions,” which were associated with the feminine (Golinski 139). Therefore, Golinski concludes, “By controlling the feminine within, the passions that always threaten to destabilize male identity, men were able to project a social world in which they would live without women, and even reproduce themselves by initiating disciples to follow in their footsteps” (140). Indeed, the Darwinian story of evolutionary development opened the door for reproduction of its claims by other thinkers about human being and further development of its sexist implications.

In the *Descent*, Darwin identifies masculine intellectual superiority as a result of sexual selection and as evidence of women’s inferiority. This attention to determining the intellectual differences between the sexes inspired other male scientists and drew the attention of feminists as a claim open to dispute. Darwin clearly states his confidence in male superiority throughout the *Descent*. This is already clear in his explanation of sexual selection, discussed above, in which he asserts that “Man is more powerful in body and mind than woman” (*DM* 242). Darwin further elaborates this claim elsewhere, most notably when he explains, “The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man’s attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands” (*DM* 234). In making his argument for sexual selection as driving the development of biological sex differentiation from an original androgynous ancestor, Darwin is compelled to emphasize the distinctions resulting from this development. However, as this claim about “intellectual powers” demonstrates, Darwin does not consider other factors, besides the biological, that may have caused this difference. In detailing sex differentiation, Darwin, like many of his contemporaries and followers, freely conflates cultural attitudes and biological attributes. Within this paradigm, Darwin could easily argue, and others could accept, that men’s dominance in intellectual and artistic pursuits proves their biological superiority, which in turn results in their intellectual dominance. Clearly, Darwin and his contemporaries lacked the framework to recognize cultural constructivism, yet this constant slippage between the cultural and the biological is nonetheless noteworthy for its circular logic, especially within the context of the careful reasoning of Darwin’s overall argument. This easy lapse into circular reasoning reflects the way that men cultivated scientific authority, as their exclusion of women proved women’s lack of fitness for science. Men’s firm hold on scientific and social discourse was self-reinforcing, a symptom and a cause of the teleological evolutionist narrative.

In fact, while scholarly attention to turn-of-the-century eugenics discourse focuses on such obvious proponents as Charles Davenport and Madison Grant,[[23]](#footnote-23) Darwin’s *Descent*, while not employing the specific word,plainly advocates for eugenics. At the conclusion of his text, Darwin argues, “Both sexes ought to refrain from marriage if they are in any marked degree inferior in body or mind…Everyone does good service, who aids toward this end” (253). He elaborates,

The advancement of the welfare of mankind is a most intricate problem: all ought to refrain from marriage who cannot avoid abject poverty for their children; for poverty is not only a great evil, but tends to its own increase by leading to recklessness in marriage. On the other hand, as Mr. Galton has remarked, if the prudent avoid marriage, whilst the reckless marry, the inferior members tend to supplant the better members of society. (253)

This argument thus reflects, and anticipates, eugenic theory in its position that inferior and superior groups of humans exist and that the human future depends on which one survives in reproduction. While largely vague in its prescriptions, Darwin’s argument clearly rests on a view of the poor as innately inferior and thereby dangerous to the biological constitution of the race as a whole. Therefore, although Darwin’s eugenicist opinions are certainly not as extreme or elaborate as other thinkers, they are nonetheless clear in their suggestions and, given their articulator, varnish eugenics thought with apparent scientific objectivity.

Darwin’s statements thus show how evolutionist attention to reproduction as crucial to the race’s future provided a paradigm for attempts to biopolitically manage social problems like poverty, and thereby, in this view, ensure continuing human progress. Within the American context, eugenicists targeted the reproduction of African-Americans and non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants as necessary to reduce and contain (Doyle 14-16). Certainly, Darwin did not endorse eugenics or racism as enthusiastically as self-proclaimed “race scientists” such as Davenport and Grant. However, I have shown in this chapter that his explication of racial and gender differences did, in fact, articulate a framework for securing racial and gender hierarchy as biologically constituted through evolution. I identify descent as key to this framework through its inscription of racial difference as the categorical result of diverging branches and of womanhood as circumscribed by reproduction and maternity.

Given this logic of descent, women’s sexuality and maternity became sites of tension in turn-of-the-century evolutionist understandings of race and gender. In her examination of the racialized mother in modernist fiction, Laura Doyle argues, “In the race-bounded economy the mother is a maker and marker of boundaries, a generator of liminality, both vertically and horizontally. She is forced across a border, or she is prohibited from crossing a border; in either case her function is to reproduce, through offspring, the life of that border” (27). Following my analysis of Darwin’s evolutionary discourse, I argue that branches of descent, by stabilizing evolutionary progress through time, organize these “borders.” Doyle’s attention to the pressures placed on women by turn-of-the-century concepts of the racial color line informs my examination, in the next chapters, of how the evolutionist scheme of race and gender via descent permeates turn-of-the-century literary works by American women. In Chapter 3, I argue that Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* (1928) reveals how evolutionist discourses of the racialized primitive and instrumental mother affect, and ultimately harm, her black-identified protagonist Helga Crane. Helga’s experience as a subject marked by both race and gender illuminates the entanglement of these categories in the evolutionist scheme of descent.

# CHAPTER 3. THE INSTABILITY OF VISIBLE DESCENT AND RACIALIZED REPRODUCTION: THE BIOPOLITICAL SUBJECT IN NELLA LARSEN’S *QUICKSAND*

Turn-of-the-century transatlantic evolutionist discourse of race and gender functioned as explanatory ground for the supposed biological inevitability of hierarchy and, moreover, for modernists’ fascination with instinctual, sensuous primitivism. Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand*, published in 1928, provides an especially potent interrogation of the epistemological and aesthetic strategies by which racial and gender hierarchies were maintained in the early twentieth-century transatlantic West. *Quicksand* demonstrates the centrality of heredity and maternity in modern schemes of race and gender through its focus on Helga Crane, a mixed-race woman struggling with, first, her racial descent and its implications for her own sexuality and reproduction, and second, with how her physical appearance embodies shifting racialized meanings in American and European contexts. As I showed in Chapter 2, the modern idea of racial difference as decipherable in visual appearance and as a sign of less-developed descent is situated in evolutionary logic. In this chapter, I analyze how *Quicksand*’s emphasis on visual appearances and its recurring images of exoticism illuminate the transatlantic operation, and effects of, this logic. Moreover, I argue that Helga’s capitulation to the maternal imperative at the novel’s end shows how, within this scheme, the instrumentalization of reproduction renders women as vessels for preserving racial hierarchy. *Quicksand*’s themes of mixed heritage, primitivism, and maternity, along with its meandering narrative structure between the United States and Europe, together respond to and critique the biological construction of race and gender in the early twentieth century.

Larsen wrote and published *Quicksand*, along with her other novel, *Passing*, in a sociopolitical climate in which biopolitical discourses of eugenics and reproductive fitness, as well as modernist primitivist aesthetics fetishizing black femininity, flourished. In this chapter, to historically situate my argument about *Quicksand*, I first briefly discuss Larsen’s biography, early twentieth-century trends of eugenics, anti-miscegenation discourse, and modernist primitivism, as well as examine a short passage from *Passing* that provides illuminating context. I then embark on my analysis of *Quicksand*.

To briefly summarize *Quicksand*, Helga is a mixed-race woman identifying as black, with a black father and white mother of Danish descent, who moves between different settings in the United States and Europe in search of belonging. The novel begins with Helga’s departure from her teaching position at an all-black academy in the South, after which she moves to Chicago and then to Harlem, travels to Copenhagen to live with her aunt and uncle, and then finally returns to Harlem, where she meets the Reverend Pleasant Green, a black Southern preacher. She marries Green and moves with him to Alabama, where she bears his children. Helga’s parental background, and many of her experiences, reflect Larsen’s own life (McDowell x-xi).[[24]](#footnote-24) In particular, Larsen worked at Fisk University and as a nurse at Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and lived in Copenhagen for a period (McDowell x). When she published her novels, she lived in Harlem (McDowell ix-xi). Therefore, Larsen’s various experiences—including her work as a nurse, her residence in Denmark, and her active role in the Harlem Renaissance—enabled her close witnessing of how these discourses and aesthetics constrained and objectified gendered, racialized subjects. In *Quicksand*, Larsen’s critical, exploratory eye provides an especially potent interrogation of the epistemological and aesthetic strategies by which racial and gender hierarchies were maintained in the early twentieth-century transatlantic West. *Quicksand* demonstrates the centrality of descent, heredity, and maternity in modern schemes of race and gender through its narrative of Helga Crane’s search for belonging and subjectivity. My analysis of how *Quicksand*’s themes, details, and narrative structure respond to the evolutionist racial discourse of its period enables further understanding of how this discourse shaped hierarchical visions and attitudes, as well as the self and sexuality of racialized, gendered subjects.

As stated, evolutionist discourse—specifically, its rendering of descent—underlies these modern strategies of race and gender categorization. If evolutionist thought is the implicit rationale for objectifying the racialized and gendered body as a marker of descent and instrument of kinship divisions, then *Quicksand* challenges this logic by showing the fragility of this framework and its harm to the racialized and gendered subject. Larsen’s experiences gave her a unique vantage point toward the evolutionist paradigm of race and gender. According to biographer George Hutchinson,

Larsen’s feminism derived…from her first-hand observations of the way female sexuality was implicated in the reproduction of race, from her experiences in Denmark and from Scandinavian modernism, from her nursing experience and her teaching of nursing history, and from her friendships with remarkable women, both black and white, in the high interracial bohemia of the 1920s. (12)

Indeed, Larsen’s experiences in this historical moment mean that she contended, whether professionally or personally, with scientifically-sanctioned paradigms of gender and race in their biopolitical and aesthetic circulation. Regarding the prevalence of biopolitical discourses of fitness and eugenics, Larsen’s work as a nurse at the Tuskegee Institute’s John A. Andrew Memorial Hospital from 1915-1916 (Hutchinson 90) is notable. At Tuskegee, she encountered medical discourse focusing on concerns about “racial survival” (Hutchinson 103-104). According to Hutchinson, the Tuskegee hospital held such events as “Better Baby Week” in order to address “public hygiene and infant mortality,” as, according to the views of the hospital’s leaders such as John A. Kenney, “modern science…had decided that the strength of every race or nation depended on low infant mortality” (103). In addition, Kenney believed that “black doctors should call for a return to country living and to eugenic mating” (Hutchinson 104). Hutchinson’s research demonstrates Larsen’s professional engagement with medical discourses of fitness and eugenics—indeed, these discourses were appropriated by African-Americans as a means of racial uplift. In my analysis of *Quicksand*, below, I show how Larsen critiqued these biologically-determined ideologies of fitness and eugenics through her depiction of Helga’s struggle against objectifying discourses of sexuality and maternity.

*Quicksand* provides a powerful critique of the ways turn-of-the-century biological visions of race and gender determined and constrained, via objectification, women marked as black. The body as an object indicating one’s position in the evolutionist scheme is grounded in both modernist primitivist aesthetics and in scientific discourses of heredity and fitness. These aesthetics and discourses were especially influential in the early twentieth century: the racialized “primitive” was a compelling figure in music and visual culture, while eugenics discourse and (particularly in America) debate over miscegenation grew in prominence. The evolutionist paradigm underpinned these trends. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the idea that racialized groups are “primitive” arises from the evolutionist idea that their lineage is closer, compared to Europeans, to the nonhuman animal stage of evolution, and thereby undeveloped. In this way, racial features are defined as indicating one’s descent from these prehistoric groups, and these groups themselves become fixed. This idea of descent as determining one’s place in progressive human evolution explains the primacy of reproduction and maternity in sustaining these categories, and this concern with reproduction manifests in early twentieth century eugenics and anti-miscegenation discourse. Therefore, briefly establishing the prevalence of both primitivist aesthetics and scientific, or reproductive-focused, racism (in short, evolutionary biopolitics) in the early twentieth century is crucial to understanding Larsen’s *Quicksand* as an interrogation of these evolutionist visions of race and gender.

For the purpose of analyzing images of primitivism in Larsen’s *Quicksand*, the specific racialization of the primitive as black and the cultural circulation of this image in the 1920s must be briefly clarified.[[25]](#footnote-25) While I have discussed evolutionist theory as the basis of the notion of racialized people as “savage” or primitive—as primal immediate descendants of the animal—in Chapter 2, an in-depth delineation of primitivism as an aesthetic is beyond this project’s scope. In reviewing modernist aesthetics of the primitive, it is important to note that the “primitive” in this context has a rather broad range of meanings, and indeed, “primitivism” as an aesthetic should be distinguished from the idea of the “primitive” in turn-of-the-century anthropology.[[26]](#footnote-26) The aesthetic fascination with primitivism was rooted in the idea of the colonized and/or racialized Other as embodying a more liberated, sensuous humanity with which the industrialized, rational West had lost touch, and thus constituting an escape from modern weariness. Donna V. Jones, for instance, explains that modernists conceived the primitive as “delimiting that realm of the irrational which modern consciousness could no longer consume” (58). Similarly, Sieglinde Lemke states of modernist primitivism, “By constructing a black *alter ego*, the Western primitivist sought to strengthen his cultural Ego or to unleash his Id. Implicit in either process is a Western self projected onto a people remote in time, place, or character” (29, emphasis original). While Lemke draws upon the era’s Freudian psychoanalytic discourse to explain primitivism’s underlying logic, racial evolutionism was also a key influence, especially in articulating the image of blackness as distinctly primitive and thus as the antithesis of white European civilization.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The black female body functioned as a central sign of primitivism in this aesthetic. As my discussion in Chapter 2 showed, evolutionist discourse configured black people and women as embodying earlier stages of evolutionary development. This scientific framework led to the cultural image of black women, marked as both racialized and gendered, as the ultimate embodiment of the primitive and, consequently, as harboring animalistic sexuality (Sander L. Gilman 83-93). Along these lines, duCille identifies primitivism as a key target of Larsen’s critique of early twentieth century images of race and gender (73). DuCille contextualizes this critique by explaining,

Primitivism, as a prevalent ideology of the early twentieth century, is characterized by an exuberance for the simple, the at-once innocent and sexually uninhibited—qualities the primitivist ascribes to the racially othered, whose alterity is fetishized. Almost by definition, primitivism thrives on icons. In the early twentieth century, no single icon combined the erotic, the exotic, and the innocent to the extent that the new Negro seemed to. (73)

The iconography of the primitive appealed to modernists, including white visitors to Harlem, as a site of uninhibited “alterity,” and in this way, desires for liberated sexuality were displaced onto the racialized, gendered body. Urmila Seshagiri explains that in modern primitivism, “black or African women are stylized into voiceless corporeality,” as “avant-garde artists typically treated black femininity as a potent counterpoint to Western industrial modernity” and “as a powerful alternative to white Western beauty, sexuality, and civility” (99). Artists who engaged in this image of the sexualized primitive woman include Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso (Seshagiri 99-101), and Larsen clearly alludes to this imagery through her character Axel Olsen, the fictional Danish painter in *Quicksand*, as I elaborate below. The primitivist image of the black woman, then, rendered her as the antithesis of civilized Western modernity and as the alternative to decorous white womanhood, constraining her in an image available for white consumption. The power of this image to circumscribe racial and gender ideology also aligns with Larsen’s concern with visual appearances as determining racial categories.

Several critics have focused on how *Quicksand* responds to modernist primitivism through recurrent images of music, fashion, and visual art. Debra B. Silverman examines images of “exoticism” (i.e., the association of blackness with the primeval jungle) in the text, arguing that Larsen “challenges…the portrayal of the black woman as exotic and always available for public consumption” (601). Likewise, Amelia DeFalco asserts, “Much of Helga’s psychological torment and restlessness can be understood as repercussions of a history of primitivist assumptions operating in medical, artistic, and popular discourse that work to turn the black female body into a fetish” (20). This brief delineation of early twentieth century primitivism, particularly its fetishization of the black female body, shows that these primitivist images, embraced by the avant-garde as an alternative to modern Western restrictions and malaise, relied on dehumanized imagery that simplified subjects’ experiences and desires into an objectified embodiment of animalistic impulses for white consumption. Evolutionist concepts of progressive development and of color as revealing descent allowed the figuring of primitive bodies as an escape from modernity. Therefore, I analyze how Larsen shows the effects of primitivism on racialized and gendered subjects, and I further add to this critical conversation by tracing how the underlying evolutionist assumptions of this image are intertwined with *Quicksand*’s narrative structure and its critique of the hegemonic maternal imperative and its biopolitical consequences.

In addition to modernist primitivism, early twentieth-century American discourses advancing eugenics and opposing miscegenation are crucial historical trends to which *Quicksand* responds through its themes of heredity and interracial sexual relationships. Moreover, the prevalence of these discourses in early twentieth century America indicates that Larsen must have been aware of how evolutionary language was mobilized for racist purposes. Although my primary focus in this chapter is on Larsen’s *Quicksand*, I will briefly turn to her second novel, *Passing*, which directly references scientific discourse about race, particularly in a conversation between the protagonist, Irene, and her husband, Brian. *Passing* focuses on the light-skinned, black-identified Irene’s conflicted attitudes toward her childhood friend Clare’s passing as white.

When Irene’s husband Brian says it is the “instinct of the race to survive and expand,” Irene responds, “Rot! Everything can’t be explained by some general biological phrase,” to which Brian says, “Absolutely everything can. Look at the so-called whites, who’ve left bastards all over the known earth. Same thing in them. Instinct of the race to survive and expand” (186). This conversation clearly contends with evolutionist ideas through its references to “instincts” and “surviv[al],” and engages with a social Darwinian concept of the races as competing with each other, which implies their existence as distinct categories. Larsen does not seem to be endorsing this concept—Brian, throughout the text, is characterized as pompous, rendering us skeptical about his theories. Larsen’s narrator also describes his statement about “instincts” as an “unqualified assertion” in the following paragraph (186). While this judgment apparently expresses Irene’s point of view, nothing in the text indicates that Brian is actually correct, and Irene’s rejection of his explanation as too “general” offers another layer of refutation. In fact, the wording in Brian’s statement somewhat undercuts its biological framework, as Brian says “so-called whites,” suggesting the artifice of stable racial categories. Furthermore, Brian’s assertion is an attempt to explain why passing is viewed as traitorous by Irene and others. Attributing the discomfort with passing to a singular instinct to propagate the race is clearly reductive in light of Larsen’s engagement with the complexities of racial kinship and appearances in *Passing*. Situated within the novel at large, Irene’s dismissal of Brian’s explanation accords with her sense of racial belonging; so, Brian’s conception of races as discrete groups in competition (i.e., akin to species) contrasts with the novel’s prevailing concern with race as a largely socially determined practice and performance, rather than an immutable biological fact. Therefore, this dialogue demonstrates Larsen’s skepticism toward biological explanations of racial categories and divisions; this skepticism provides important context for Larsen’s contention with primitivism, heredity, and maternity in *Quicksand*.

Furthermore, the force of this biological paradigm is exemplified by the popularly of eugenics discourse in the early twentieth century United States. Larsen wrote her novels during an era of heightened discourse about racialized reproduction and its consequences for the progressive development of the human species. This concern was particularly evident in eugenics discourse, which Seitler defines as “a specialized theory of the optimal production of human being for an ideal social order” (136). In early twentieth century America, this “ideal social order” was defined as western European, middle-to-upper class, and “intelligent.” Laura Doyle explains that, while eugenics was promoted by some progressive social reformers as a way of “advancing” the lower classes, “The research carried out by mainstream eugenics significantly bolstered the prevailing social distinctions drawn between persons on the bases of race, sex, and class. In so doing eugenics was only adhering to practices and trends of thought that were well established in the biological sciences” (12-13). Doyle’s point emphasizes how eugenics’ deployment as a method to reinforce human hierarchies functioned as an extension of biological concepts; this accords with my demonstration, in Chapter 2, of Darwin’s endorsement of eugenicist thinking. Eugenics’ concern with reproduction and progressive development relied on the evolutionist ideas of teleological development and racial groups as fixed categories perpetuated by lines of descent. Eugenics discourse was medically institutionalized, legally codified, and popularly disseminated by men such as Charles Davenport, for instance, who established the Eugenics Records Office research facility in 1910, and in the 1920s, advised Congress and helped the American Eugenics Society popularize eugenics (Seitler 134, Lois A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche 12-14). During this period, writers such as Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard also published widely-read books that characterized interracial reproduction as a dangerous threat to American whiteness (Weinbaum 72).

Anti-miscegenation rhetoric was also prevalent during this period, which is important to note for my analysis of *Quicksand*’s themes of descent, heredity, and maternity. Reproduction between black and white individuals was viewed as tainting the white race and threatening its degeneration toward an earlier, lower form (Stepan 105-106; Weinbaum 188). Accordingly, interracial marriages were illegal or taboo in the United States until the mid-twentieth century.[[28]](#footnote-28) Interracial relationships are a central concern in Larsen’s work. Indeed, a brief reference to a contemporary event in *Passing* illustrates Larsen’s consciousness of institutionalized anti-miscegenation discourse. As Irene reflects on the dangers of Clare’s marriage to a racist white man, she thinks of the 1925 *Rhinelander v. Rhinelander* court case (Larsen 228), in which Kip Rhinelander, the heir to a wealthy white New York family, sought a divorce on the grounds that his wife, Alice Beatrice Jones, had supposedly deceived him about her biracial heritage.[[29]](#footnote-29) Miriam Thaggert notes that, mirroring *Passing*’s thematic concerns, *Rhinelander* was a “legal trial in which these issues of knowledge, passing, and the gaze combined in a process to interrogate the race and veracity of a woman” (1). Thaggert draws attention to the fact that the gaze of the white male jurors saw the marriage as illicit, thus demonstrating the larger discursive objectification of black women, via vision, in the modern era (2). By alluding to this legal trial, Larsen emphasizes the prominence of discourse about interracial unions, and their implied reproductive consequences, in the 1920s. Larsen’s awareness of this discourse clearly influenced her engagement with themes of identity, sexuality, and reproduction in her writing.[[30]](#footnote-30) In *Quicksand*, this engagement is evident not only in Helga’s grappling with her own heritage, but in her ambivalent attitudes toward coupling and childbearing. Eugenics and anti-miscegenation rhetoric mobilized evolutionary theory as support for the biopolitical enforcement of racial and class hierarchy and instrumentalization of women as primarily reproductive vessels. Dana Seitler observes that in the eugenicist view, “Male and female reproductive bodies were seen as a function of time: the healthy body of the future, the unhealthy body of the past” (136). This view of reproduction as a “function of time” clearly arises from the popular understanding of evolution as a progressive narrative in which whiteness is the enlightened “future” and blackness is the bestial “past.”

In *Quicksand*, Helga’s struggle for subjectivity against the currents of objectification emerge in the text’s shifting representations of the body—the narrative presents Helga, on the one hand, as an aesthetic surface, a figure in a painting, or on the other hand, conveys her loss of subjectivity in bodily processes through disjointed imagery. This movement between stable surface appearances and chaotic processes draws attention to how the racialized and gendered body is objectified as a passive thing to be consumed, or as an instrument to be used, by white patriarchal evolutionist ideology of the visual, descent, and reproduction.

## Visual Markings of Primitive Descent

In *Quicksand*, Helga’s awareness of her mixed parentage engenders her sense of isolation from the demarcated racial groups of her day and, moreover, her uncertainty about her own kinship is complicated by her visual appearance. Helga’s descent and appearance are continuously reinterpreted from within and without, and this wavering entanglement between kinship and the visual shows how they simultaneously reinforce and undermine each other in the modern evolutionist episteme. Larsen shows that while the primacy of color designates Helga as a member of the black race, at the same time, her descent unsettles that classification. This view of Helga’s biracial heritage as unsettling racial categories may seem like a typical interpretation of the mulatta character.

As critics have shown, the “tragic mulatta” has functioned in American literature as a method of appealing to white audiences, and seen as tragic due to a simplistic, binary view of the color line.[[31]](#footnote-31) Indeed, the mulatto’s liminal positioning enables recognition of the fragility of the color line. Carby observes, “The figure of the mulatto should be understood and analyzed as a narrative device of mediation” (89) and further, “The mulatta figure was a recognition of the difference between and separateness of the two races at the same time as it was a product of a sexual relationship between white and black” (90). This connection between the mulatta and interracial sexuality is a key concern in *Quicksand*, as Helga’s awareness of her parentage influences her sense of belonging, and thereby actions, throughout the text. However, Helga’s situation is distinct from the typical American mulatto story, in which offspring results from a wealthy white man and a subordinate black woman, as Jeffrey Gray notes, “Helga’s [parentage] is not the plantation case of the white master’s seduction/rape of the black woman slave” (259). Rather, Helga, like Larsen herself, is the product of a consensual relationship between a black man and a white woman, and so her story, in deviating from the traditional mulatto narrative, unsettles both racial and gender stereotypes and defies tidy conclusions. Walker, therefore, argues that Larsen’s “close attention to the particular dynamics of each place [in America and Europe]…enables her to debunk the myth of the ‘tragic mulatta’ by locating the source of her protagonist’s woes not in her body and mind but in the flawed social world around her” (174). In other words, Helga’s experience is “tragic” because her context cannot accommodate her existence, not because her existence itself unsettles any ontological biological truths.

Helga’s response to her positioning as mulatta is complex. Helga’s focus on descent causes her shame about her mixed heritage, especially in self-consciously middle-class black spaces. *Quicksand* begins with Helga’s growing dissatisfaction with her position at Naxos, a black educational institution in the South, a clear reference to Tuskegee (Hutchinson 107-108). Feeling confined by the institution’s strict values of respectability, Helga decides to leave for the North. In a meeting with Dr. Anderson, the head of Naxos, prior to her departure, Helga’s anxiety about her place within the black community flares up. Dr. Anderson says to Helga, “You have dignity and breeding” and “tendencies inherited from good breeding” (Larsen 21). Helga feels “a lacerated pride” in response, and retorts, “The joke is on you, Dr. Anderson. My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married” (Larsen 21). Here, the text emphasizes the significance of descent as determining one’s racial kinship, and shows that in this context, class is connected to race as a determinant of value. Helga feels anger toward Dr. Anderson because she knows that her heritage excludes her from the black middle class’s idea of “good breeding”: her maternal half places her outside the black kinship domain, giving her the taint of an outsider, while her (possibly unmarried) parents’ lack of respectability and lower class status (a “gambler” and an “immigrant”) render Helga illegitimate and possibly degenerate. Carby argues that in *Quicksand*, Larsen “refused the resolutions offered by the code of black middle-class morality at the same time as she launched a severe critique against the earlier but still influential ideology of racial uplift” (168). This scene clearly demonstrates Larsen’s critique of “black middle-class morality,” as Helga’s retort to Dr. Anderson illuminates the snobbery and absurdity of his supposed compliment, and perhaps most importantly, the falseness of its framework.

Moreover, Dr. Anderson’s focus on “good breeding,” and Naxos’ overall reliance on class respectability as a means of uplift, show how social Darwinist ideology—regardless of whether it was conceived as such—concerned with descent and class penetrated some corners of black thought.[[32]](#footnote-32) While “breeding” as shorthand for class status is certainly not limited to Darwinism, this particular phrasing takes on distinct meaning in light of Helga’s mixed-race status and in the context of a historical moment preoccupied with sexuality and reproduction as a progressive mechanism. In fact, breeding as a black middle-class value is echoed later in the novel, when James Vayle urges Helga to reproduce by saying, “The race is sterile at the top. Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children…We’re the ones who must have children if the race is to get anywhere” (Larsen 103). This statement, following a trend in some black thought that the “Talented Tenth” must reproduce for the advancement of the race,[[33]](#footnote-33) clearly engages in eugenicist thought. The “race” is a group needing to advance its own interests, and selective breeding—the propagation of more children by the “better class”—is necessary for the race’s development. While eugenicist logic was primarily promoted for the preservation of white hierarchy, it was also appropriated by progressive reformers with the idea that an oppressed social group could uplift itself by selectively breeding its superior members.

Furthermore, the fact that Vayle—member of an established black bourgeois family (Larsen 7-8)—urges Helga to breed shows the close interrelation of race and class in eugenicist thought, or more broadly, social Darwinism. According to Stepan, in Britain, where eugenics originated, “most eugenists [sic] assumed that social class was a function of hereditary worth” (125) and “the ‘class’ eugenics of Britain…was easily translated into racial terms” (126). This interrelation was also evident in American eugenics, which was partly motivated by the fact that “lower” races and classes had higher birthrates than the (white) middle and upper classes (Doyle 13). Vayle’s comment that “Negroes of the better class” need to reproduce clearly echoes this anxiety that the lower class’s outnumbering the wealthier and more educated classes is detrimental for a given group’s development. Therefore, the theme of descent in *Quicksand* not only pertains to Helga’s racial identity, it also involves gendered expectations for the maternal instrumentalization of her body, as well as social class. Indeed, examining the effects of evolutionist thought on biopolitical oppression in the early twentieth century must account for class. In the evolutionist paradigm, race marks one’s primitive descent, while class marks one’s inability to compete. In this view, selective breeding can function as a mechanism for a group’s increased competition or progress.

As this suggests, the black middle-class focus on breeding that Larsen highlights also enables consideration of how racialized descent functions in the evolutionist paradigm. This preoccupation with breeding, whether as a sign of worth (Anderson) or as a mechanism for progress (Vayle) reveals the slippery logic of evolutionist racialization. As I discussed in Chapter 2, evolutionist notions of progress and nineteenth-century anthropology organized the races into distinct populations, rather than individuals, competing with one another. This view of the races as distinct, competing populations is evident in Vayle’s statement. However, this view of each race as a mass is at the same time undercut by the notion that “better Negroes” exist, and that they have “tendencies inherited from good breeding.” The black race cannot be a homogenous mass if some are “better” than others and if these superior traits are inheritable. Larsen thus shows how black intra-racial class divisions undermine racist notions of black homogeneity. Therefore, Larsen’s attention to rhetoric focused on biological inheritance shows that concepts of race as a biologically stable fact, and of class as determining value, are fragile and potentially at odds.

The inherent tension of this logic is further underscored by Helga’s description of her parentage. While Anderson reads Helga’s appearance and manner as evidence of “good breeding,” or superiority, her actual descent makes hollow the assumed transparency of her heritage; this is further emphasized by the deviance of her illegitimacy. In other words, the belief that one’s appearance is an intelligible sign of inherited value, conceived in terms of race and class, is false. Helga’s comment that her mother was an “immigrant” is also noteworthy. At first glance, her mother’s immigrant status, along with signaling a lower social class, may seem to indicate inferiority within the context of early twentieth century American racial views, despite her whiteness. 1920s America passed strict immigration laws, partly due to fears of racial intermixing, to prevent the entry of supposedly degenerate groups from Ireland, southern and eastern Europe, and China (Weinbaum 70-74). However, in *Quicksand*, Helga’s mother is Danish—Helga’s Scandinavian descent places her in a supposedly superior group. Indeed, to justify anti-immigrant laws in 1924, President Calvin Coolidge stated, “Biological laws show that Nordics deteriorate when mixed with other races” (qtd. in Seitler 134). Coolidge’s attention to potential “deterioration” shows how eugenicist logic permeated American thought about race and reproduction during this period, and how the idea that the bloodlines of superior races needed to be propagated without risk of impurity was central to this scheme. Therefore, Helga’s heritage is both a threat and an ironic rebuke of this logic, a demonstration of its instability. Helga’s anger toward Dr. Anderson shows her awareness of the figurative meaning, and real consequences, of her heritage within Western evolutionist racism.

Helga’s awareness that her revelation of her actual heritage will discomfort Dr. Anderson shows how, while the black middle class obviously did not subscribe to evolutionist racism’s conviction of white supremacy, it nevertheless accepted the color line, and its biological basis, as intrinsic to American racial organization. For those advocating racial uplift, this was clearly strategic, as a unified vision of the race allowed for organization of its interests. Moreover, the legacy of the American one-drop rule meant that anyone whose appearance, especially skin color, marked them as having black descent resulted in their exclusion from whiteness, and so their claiming kinship with the black community was necessary (Zackodnik 35-37). In *Quicksand*, Helga follows this pattern, joining the black community in Naxos, Harlem, and Alabama. Yet Larsen also shows that the color line effectively erases Helga in both white and black American communities. For racialized subjects, this is the paradox of the modern Western reliance on descent and appearance for racial classification: the color line forcibly compels organizing around this classification, which simultaneously reinforces its logic.

Larsen therefore shows that Helga, as a biracial woman, experiences alienation in various racially demarcated spaces. Indeed, her discomfort in the black community is concurrent with her white American relatives’ rejection of her. When visiting her uncle, Peter Nilssen, his wife rejects any kinship with Helga (Larsen 28-29); afterward, reflecting on this rejection, Helga “saw herself for an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden” (Larsen 29). The word “sore” connotes disease, and this is further emphasized by the modifier “obscene,” which adds suggestions of shame and perversion. This description shows that, within a taxonomic view of the races as distinct levels of progression, racial intermixing is viewed as tainting the optimum white Northern European category with the degeneracy of a cruder—that is, racialized—category. For the Nilssens, then, Helga’s kinship must be kept “hidden” because she embodies their exposure to contamination by a less-developed category of human. Their relation to Helga is dangerous because it threatens the white supremacist idea of firm, biologically determined racial categories.

Following this depiction of white apprehension toward racial liminality, Larsen further shows how the American social world’s reliance on race as an ontological category affects Helga’s experience in the black middle-class community. This is clearly shown by Helga’s revelation of her heritage to Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a “prominent ‘race’ woman” (Larsen 37). Helga tells Mrs. Hayes-Rore the story of her parentage, and in response, Mrs. Hayes-Rore “felt that the story, dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, was beyond definite discussion. For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned—and therefore they do not exist” (Larsen 39). Mrs. Hayes-Rore instructs her to keep secret her heritage from other black people (Larsen 41). Walker notes that in black spaces, Helga is “a racial interloper” (172), and indeed, Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s response stresses the delicacy with which Helga must tread. Further stressing the significance of Helga’s biraciality, Walker argues, “Larsen suggests that the nation’s insistence on a racial binary and the silences and arbitrary negations it entails erase the existence of racially liminal figures, rendering them socially invisible” (170). Larsen’s words “as among,” in drawing an explicit parallel between “black people’s” and “white people’s” attitudes toward “race intermingling,” suggest the imposed “invisibility” of Helga’s full existence in different social spaces. Similar to the Nilssens, Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s preferred strategy is denial, to uphold the pretense of stable categories by silencing testimonies—verbal or embodied—of categorical dissolution. However, while the Nilssens’ refusal is premised on their maintenance of white supremacy and power, Mrs. Hayes-Rore seems to take a more calculated stance, as she is aware that racial uplift necessitates the maintenance of racial unity.

Moreover, the text draws attention to Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s concern, shown by her reference to “adultery,” with the implied sexual transgression of Helga’s origins. The association between hypersexuality and blackness (owing to the evolutionist presumption of their kinship with animals, see Chapter 2), was a stereotype against which racial uplift advocates crusaded—and Helga’s story, of a black father and white mother, was especially fraught, since white supremacy viewed black men as savage threats to white womanhood and used this as justification for violence.[[34]](#footnote-34) While Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s denial is tactical, motivated by her project for equality, Larsen nevertheless shows the potential damage of this denial. This critique of middle-class uplift strategies is enabled by Helga’s liminality, as Hazel V. Carby explains: “Helga explored the contradictions of her racial, sexual, and class position by being both inside and outside these perspectives” (169).

Therefore, Helga’s embodiment between racial categories both weakens the supposed immutability of those categories and perturbs the black middle class’s strategic containment of sexuality, the latter of which is further echoed by Helga’s struggle with primitivist visions of black female sexuality. In this way, the relation between race and sexuality is evident not only in stereotypes, but in how they work together to determine a subject’s classification. By showing how Helga’s descent is denied by different racial groups, Larsen’s text illuminates the power of the modern evolutionist episteme of race, and how its assumption of the visual transparency of groups fixed by descent is actually continually threatened by fluctuating reproductive practices and bonds of kinship.

## Embodied Visibility and the Instability of Color

While Helga’s consciousness of her heritage produces alienation, her physical appearance—marked as it is by presumed nonwhite characteristics—situates her within the bounds of black subjectivity. The evolutionist understanding of race figures visual features as a method for determining one’s racial classification and is grounded in an epistemology of reading descent, inferior or superior, from physical features. The visual as a method for deciphering race seems like a commonplace; however, this itself shows that the seeming transparency of visible evidence of racial belonging warrants interrogation, especially in light of how this idea gained force and currency at the turn of the twentieth century, due to the evolutionist paradigm as well as to technological advances in photography. Seitler examines the relation between the human sciences and photography during this period, and explains that the “turn to ocular evidence inaugurated a particular and long-standing practice of understanding human identity as a visual entity” (57), and furthermore, “this new scientific visual order sought to produce a literacy of the body, a fixed grammar of the corporeal, which privileges vision as knowledge” (69). Seitler’s phrase “fixed grammar of the corporeal” provides an apt means for understanding the visual’s role in the modern biological figuring of humanity, as it clarifies how the emphasis on the optic organizes the fluctuating variety of bodies into a coherent system. The idea of “human identity” as a primarily “visual entity” is carefully explored in *Quicksand*, as Larsen shows how appearances are inscribed and classified by this “literacy of the body,” even as their potential for disrupting this epistemology lurks under—or more accurately, upon—the surface.

Modern visual epistemology of the body especially involves race as a socially and politically comprehensible structure. Alexander G. Weheliye explains, “Race makes its mark in the dominion of the ideological and physiological, or rather race scripts the elision of the former with the latter in the flesh” (24). Weheliye’s attention to the “flesh” as racial locus illuminates how the ocular systemization of the body obscures its “ideological” basis, and how the structuring of race as a visibly biological feature generates race as an ontological entity. In light of this epistemology of the visual, just as Larsen interrogates the paradoxical logic of descent as a tool of racial belonging, she problematizes the link between race and physical appearance—especially color—as an objective scientific reality. The text thereby disentangles the assumed symmetry of racial descent and appearance. At the same time, it shows the degree to which color, or physical appearance, as marker of race is entrenched in Helga’s transatlantic experience.

*Quicksand*’s consistent attention to surface appearances showcases their prominent role in shaping modern reality and enables dissection of the seeming intelligibility of color as racial determinant. Hostetler argues that “In *Quicksand* the emphasis on color advances a thematics of race” (35). Indeed, Larsen’s emphasis on the colors of objects and clothing from the novel’s start highlights the pervasive significance of the visual in Helga’s modern world, enabling consideration of how racialized and gendered bodies are also constituted as visually determined objects. As Hostetler (37) observes, *Quicksand* begins with a detailed description of Helga’s consciously aesthetic personal chamber at Naxos, noting objects and their colors, “a black and red shade,” “blue Chinese carpet,” “white pages,” a “brass bowl,” and “many-colored nasturtiums” (Larsen 1). This emphasis on surface hues sets the scene for Larsen’s description of Helga’s physical appearance in the next paragraph.

While scholars have noted how the detailing of her room shows the significance of consumer objects in Helga’s construction of her identity (Carby 172; Wall 96), I want to point out how Larsen’s extended description of Helga’s embodied appearance is also important here. Larsen initially positions Helga as another object among this décor, describing her “well fitted to that framing of light and shade” (2). Walker views this as follows: “the large room dwarfs Helga, and in it, she seems scarcely distinguishable from the many orientalized objects” (169), while Hostetler claims, “in this novel, with its emphasis on the visual, a clear picture of Helga’s face is conspicuously absent” (36). While Walker and Hostetler highlight the text’s connection between the room’s inanimate objects and Helga, they suggest that Helga’s embodiment is overshadowed by her surroundings. However, close reading of Larsen’s description of Helga herself actually shows careful attention to her physical features. Larsen describes these physical features thus: Helga has a “sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin,” with “black, very broad brows over soft, yet penetrating, dark eyes,” and a “pretty mouth” with “sensitive and sensuous lips” and a “good” nose, and finally, her hair is “curly, blue-black…plentiful and always straying in a little wayward, delightful way” (2). This description belies Hostetler’s claim that Helga’s face is “conspicuously absent”; rather, the narrator stresses the particularities of Helga’s features. These details are notable because, while they largely correspond with stereotypically “black” features—her “dark eyes” and “sensuous lips”—they are simultaneously racially ambiguous. For instance, the descriptor “good nose” is rather vague and open to interpretation. Moreover, Helga’s hair, while “blue-black,” is ambiguously “curly” and “straying,” which, again, can be read different ways, suggesting something between the stereotypical textures of kinky black hair and straight white hair. Therefore, like Clare Kendry in *Passing*, Helga’s physical features waver between the visual typology of black and white, unsettling assumptions of simple categorization. While Helga’s face is certainly not “absent,” then, the narrative cataloging of her features does produce an incomplete image in which her face, as a whole, is not quite clear; instead, it is fractured among this index of qualities.

Furthermore, Larsen’s description of Helga’s skin as “like yellow satin” emphasizes her particular racial status. While Helga’s skin is not dark, the word “yellow” indicates that it is certainly something other than white, which in the American racial scheme places her within the boundaries of blackness. The comparison of Helga’s skin to material “yellow satin” draws attention to its importance as a surface, and while I dispute Walker’s claim that Helga is “indistinguishable” from her surrounding objects, the likening of her skin to “satin” certainly emphasizes her objectified status. Carby observes that “social relations which objectified the body permeate” *Quicksand* (172), and this is clearly established in the careful detailing of Helga’s physical appearance at the start of the novel. Helga’s skin is objectified because, in its sociopolitical context, its color invokes the gaze of classification. The cataloging of Helga’s face further emphasizes this objectification, as it shows how the reliance on the visual to determine racial kinship produces a fracturing of the subject, in which their personhood is broken into material parts available for the determining gaze of white masculine supremacy. Yet Larsen, by threading this description with ambiguities, also suggests how our understanding of certain features, such as skin color, relies on embedded assumptions, and thus she shows the latent instability of this visual epistemology.

Therefore, the text’s situating Helga as objectified due to her embodiment lays the foundation for the novel’s chief conflict, Helga’s struggle to shape her subjectivity against her objectifying social context. Wall notes that “as they navigate between racial and cultural polarities, Larsen’s protagonists attempt to fashion a sense of self” (89). Wall’s insight illuminates how in *Quicksand*, Helga’s search for self is a confrontation with the “racial and cultural” circumstances that reduce her to material object, whether as sexualized primitive or as instrumentalized mother. As Helga grapples with the force of sexualized primitivism in both America and Europe, her conflicted attitudes reveal the text’s critique of the modern use of visual appearances to define biological being. Two key occurrences in *Quicksand* demonstrate this interrogation: first, the Harlem nightclub scene, and second, Helga’s experiences in Copenhagen.

In the Harlem nightclub scene, the text’s focus on the spectacle of dancers allows interrogation of scopic biological determinations, an especially meaningful interrogation since it occurs in a setting which, within its historical context, epitomized black primitivism. In this scene, Helga is a spectator, described as “looking curiously about her,” especially noticing the black dancers’ visual appearances (Larsen 59). The narrator describes this scene:

The crowd became a swirling mass. For the hundredth time she marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers. A dozen shades slid by. There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair; straight hair, straightened hair, curly hair, crinkly hair, woolly hair. She saw black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eyes in brown faces, blue eyes in tan faces. Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia, in a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semi-barbaric, sophisticated, exotic, were here. (Larsen 59-60)

Helga’s gaze upon these dancers and her attention toward their variety, together with this passage’s references to racialized assumptions, demonstrate the text’s critique of the transparency of appearances. In the description “swirling mass,” the modifier “swirling” highlights the heterogeneity of this “mass” or group. Moreover, the enumeration of colors and features within the following sentences unsettles the notion of the black race as a homogenous mass. The evocative list of colors challenges the view that white and black races constitute a fixed binary, and instead, highlights the subtle variety of the black community. Notably, Langston Hughes employs a similar strategy in his poem “Harlem Sweeties,” published later, in 1942. Like Larsen, Hughes uses a list to describe the multitude of shades that compose the various skin colors of the black community; for example, he includes such variations as “peach-skinned,” “cocoa brown,” and “caramel” (245). Variety is explicitly emphasized when, near the poem’s end, the speaker says, “All through the spectrum / Harlem girls vary” (246).[[35]](#footnote-35) However, while this poem and Larsen’s text are similar in their challenges to massification, Hughes’ poem has distinctly sexual overtones. This is clear in its consistent figurative use of food to convey color, as evident in the above quotations (“peach-skinned”), its title, and its ending lines, “luscious / Delicious, *fine* Sugar Hill” (246, emphasis original). Hughes celebrates black variety by reveling in its “lusciousness” and comparing it to sweet foods, but at the same time, this suggests a masculine gaze that views these bodies as ripe for consumption.

In the passage from *Quicksand*, meanwhile, the enumeration of appearances is presented in language that is mostly nonsexual, with special attention to subtle variations. The narrator, aligning the reader with Helga’s position of spectatorship, thus invites consideration of the group’s heterogeneity. This description shows that skin color, rather than fitting in to neat typologies, actually exists along a vivid “spectrum” (to echo Hughes) that cannot be so rigidly categorized. Walker argues that Larsen’s depiction of the color line in *Quicksand* and *Passing* emphasizes the fragility of the assumption that race is a biological fact. According to Walker, Larsen shows that “instead of the color line resulting from biological difference, biological difference appears to result from the color line: the barrier *seems* to produce the fact of biological difference” (177, emphasis original). In the Harlem nightclub scene, the spectacle of dancers reveals how typological epistemology flattens variety. The lines between blackness and whiteness become indistinct—there is not one visible black type or one visible white type, and instead, as divisions and binaries are collapsed, color is no longer self-evident or axiomatic. Instead of homogeneity and typology, there is heterogeneity and overlap, and the scientific structure of race as a stable category is defamiliarized. Yet after this passage’s vivid catalog, the narrator says of Helga, “But she was blind to its charm, purposely aloof and a little contemptuous, and soon her interest in the moving mosaic waned” (60). The novel suggests that Helga cannot enjoy this variety because, due to the dominant discourse of the time, she views it through the lens of primitivist aesthetics and thus understands the dance as confirming primitivism and its associated objectification.

Larsen further highlights the oppression of primitivist positioning in her portrayal of Helga’s travel to Copenhagen. While Helga finds a degree of liberation from American racial hierarchy in Europe, she realizes that the Danes’ exoticization of her echoes American views: in both contexts, she embodies descent from the primitive. Silverman remarks, “Helga’s relatives sculpt her in their white image of blackness—the black female exotic” (609), and I argue, furthermore, that Larsen’s portrayal of this “sculpting” foregrounds the evolutionist racialized logic underlying this image of the exotic primitive. Helga’s relatives, the Dahls, dress her in colorful, gaudy outfits and parade her at parties. Although Helga enjoys the attention to a certain degree, the narrator relates, “Helga felt like a veritable savage” (Larsen 69) and moreover, “felt like nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited” (Larsen 70). The words “savage,” “species,” and “exhibited” confront the evolutionist view of human racial divisions that circulated in popular discourse from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. As I note in Chapter 2, turn-of-the-century evolutionist biology and anthropology referred to “savages” as points of comparison between “civilized” humans and animals, and earnestly considered the question of whether the human races constituted distinct species, a question which was continuously debated in subsequent biology and anthropology. Larsen’s description of Helga as being “exhibited,” meanwhile, recalls the practice of exhibiting so-called savages from colonized territories at fairs and expositions in Europe and the United States, such as the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which displayed “spectacles of barbarous races” as a contrast to the civilized “White City” (Gail Bederman 35).[[36]](#footnote-36) Therefore, Helga’s alienation as an exoticized object in Denmark is a result of popular discourse that questioned racialized subjects’ belonging in the human species or to civilization. Although Helga is related to the Dahls, the mark of black descent via her skin tone renders her as sharing the kinship of the primitive, making her an object for the gazes of the Europeans.

Her positioning as primitive object is shown most clearly in her final encounter with the fictional painter Axel Olsen, who tells Helga, after she refuses his marriage proposal, “You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute” (Larsen 87). This remark demonstrates how this primitivist imagining—the identification of Helga with “Africa”—determined black women as sexual above all else. While Olsen, as a European, describes this as “warm,” or attractive, his calling Helga a “prostitute” (due to her embrace of the luxurious clothing the Dahls have given her) shows how this supposedly positive view of the exotic quickly slips into essentialist degradation. During this exchange, Olsen shows Helga his portrait of her, about which the narrator relates Helga’s thoughts: “It wasn’t, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features” (Larsen 89). The text emphasizes Olsen’s sexualization of Helga and her resistance of it as not “herself.” Wall notes, “This scene more than any other shows how inextricably bound sexual and racial identity are…Olsen knows nothing of African women, but that does not shake his belief in their exotic primitivism” (102).

While the Europeans’ view of Helga as intriguing exotic initially flatters Helga, she increasingly becomes conscious of the limits of this positioning. After the encounter with Olsen, she decides to return to America. In showing how the European fascination with primitivism predetermines Helga, Larsen’s novel demonstrates how the comprehension of racial appearance as signaling primitive descent fortifies the stereotyping of racialized and gendered subjects as inherently sensual objects.

## The Biopolitical Narrative of the Racialized Mother

The linked discourses of modernist primitivism and modern anti-miscegenation biopolitics have a lasting impact upon the racialized and gendered subject. Larsen shows Helga’s grappling with the meaning of her descent and physical appearance. Helga struggles for self-definition as her embodiment and descent are subsumed in a logic of racial typology as biological fact. Descent, through its conception as distinct lineage, appears to stabilize racial categories. Following this concern with descent, reproduction, motherhood in particular, is a prominent element in the maintenance of race as a seemingly biological fact.

In *Quicksand*, Helga’s childbearing becomes the central event in the narrative’s conclusion. The narrative as a whole, moreover, displays a recurrent preoccupation with the racial dimensions of maternity—not only does Helga struggle with her parental origins, but she also expresses apprehension about the possibility of maternity. In light of this apprehension, as well as Helga’s bourgeois urban existence through most of the novel, the narrative’s shift to her abrupt decision to marry the Reverend Pleasant Green, move with him to rural Alabama, and bear his children is jarring. These unexpected developments, however, advance the novel’s concerns with how modern paradigms of biological conditions of embodiment and kinship oppress black women and naturalize that oppression. Larsen’s attention to the interwoven meanings, and effects, of these paradigms is illuminated by Weheliye’s claim that “the anchoring of racial difference in physiology and the banning of black subjects from the domain of the human occur in and through gender and sexuality” (42). Gender and sexuality are intrinsic to the modern understanding of race as biological; in this analysis, this has already been seen in Helga’s struggle with her parentage and the sexualization of Helga as exotic primitive. The novel’s depiction of maternity as seemingly unavoidable fate further emphasizes this operation. Hostetler points out the relation between the novel’s seemingly disparate events, arguing that “Notions of race and gender are articulated in a dialectic between aesthetic surfaces and biological constraints” (39). I argue that *Quicksand*’s shift from Helga’s preoccupation with aesthetic appearances to the biological limits of maternity in fact pivot upon the positioning of her embodiment as predetermined by her racialized appearance and gendered reproductive ability. Furthermore, the unsettlement provoked by this narrative shift contributes to a nonlinear narrative, resulting in a feminist destabilization of notions of linear progress and easy resolution.

Prior to Helga’s final capitulation to marriage and childbearing, the text expresses her unease about giving life to children in a racist context. In Helga’s view, giving birth means providing new material for the continuation of racial suffering and violence. Earlier, I discussed Larsen’s portrayal of how the black middle class used the concept of “good breeding” as a means to advance racial uplift. This is exemplified by James Vayle’s encouragement to reproduce in order to maintain the “best” of the race. As I argued, Vayle’s urging illustrates how the black middle class appropriated eugenicist discourse for their own ends, yet Larsen also showcases the fragility of this rhetoric through the irony that Helga’s mixed-race, lower class origins undercut this logic of “good breeding.” This example shows the linkage between descent and reproduction, and moreover, how Helga’s capacity for reproduction is situated as a tool for perpetuating the typology of race. This positioning constitutes black women as circumscribed by their biology and uniquely responsible for the racialized future, a logic discussed by Dorothy Roberts. Roberts’ term “bio-determinism” (20) designates how American white supremacist discourse projects racist structures onto the figure of the black mother by situating her as the embodied instrument of racial oppression.

*Quicksand* stresses black women’s reproductively-situated positioning through Helga’s apprehension toward maternity. After arriving in Denmark, Helga reflects on her aversion to returning to America and its entrenched racial oppression, and identifies childbearing as a key reason—and as an agent of racial oppression in itself:

How stupid she had been ever to have thought that she could marry and perhaps have children in a land where every dark child was handicapped at the start by the shroud of color! She saw, suddenly, the giving birth to little, helpless, unprotesting Negro children as a sin, an unforgivable outrage. More black folk to suffer indignities. More dark bodies for mobs to lynch. (Larsen 75)

Helga’s attempt to envision a future for herself in America centers on marriage and childbearing, the images women are compelled to hope for. Yet Helga cannot envision this ideal, because she knows that her potential children are not guaranteed safe futures. Helga’s grim vision of reproduction focuses on images of color: in these few sentences, the word “dark” is repeated and used alongside “Negro” and “black.” This preoccupation with color is associated with such phrasing as “handicapped,” “shroud of color,” and “helpless.” Together, these words suggest that, in the American context, blackness constitutes an obstacle, in which one’s physical appearance, or “color,” exists as a “shroud,” or in other words, hindrance and marker of death, to one’s dignity and safety. In addition, the use of the word “bodies” in the last sentence emphasizes that this limitation is bound, by racist discourse, as inherent to one’s materiality. In analyzing the biopolitics of racist violence, Weheliye observes, “Racialized political violence always possesses a function beyond its mere existence, which is the façade of race as an absolute biological substance that enforces existent categories while also producing new ones” (71). In *Quicksand*, Helga views potential future violence as an unavoidable outcome of producing new black bodies; following Weheliye, this view of violence as inevitable, in turn, reinforces the sociocultural positioning of blackness as a self-inherent limit, and consequently as a biological given. Thus, the last sentence of the above quotation evokes an image of raw material for fresh violence, and Helga thereby views reproduction as “an unforgivable outrage”—as the production of vulnerable bodies condemned, in the view of the dominant paradigm of biopolitical racism, by their physiology. Helga’s apprehension thus shows that reproduction is not neutral, but rather that it is a gendered function of racial hierarchy. Moreover, the association between racial appearance and violence gives this oppression the appearance of biological inevitability. For these reasons, Helga views her own reproduction as limited by her racialized embodiment, as a risk.

In light of this antipathy toward childbearing, Helga’s decision to marry Reverend Green and bear his children is a surprising shift. However, this decision appears to be Helga’s attempt to fulfill her desires while rejecting the hypersexuality that has been ascribed to her embodiment throughout the narrative. McDowell argues that, following Helga’s sexual reticence through most of the text, she finds respectability with Reverend Green, since “the only condition under which sexuality is not shameless is if it finds sanction in marriage” (xxi). In other words, after her objectification by Axel Olsen and rejection by Dr. Anderson, Helga finds a socially acceptable outlet with Green for sexual desire. Moreover, the novel itself suggests that the Reverend offers a seeming escape from the body. During their first meeting, Helga wonders over his mind, which is described as “a mind that was certain that it was secure because it was concerned only with things of the soul, spiritual things, which to him meant religious things” (Larsen 115). Helga is attracted to the Reverend because he represents the possibility of disavowing one’s embodiment, which for Helga, has thus far entrapped her in racialized and gendered images and expectations. The narrative, however, demonstrates that this disavowal is an impossible hope, since both Reverend Green and Helga satisfy their sexual desires with one another, and so clearly do not escape embodied pleasures. Larsen’s attention to the results of that sexual expression, the multiple children that Helga bears after she moves with the Reverend to rural Alabama, further emphasizes that in this context, the body and its processes are inescapable.

Helga’s marriage to the Reverend is thus explicable in light of her difficult relationship with her own sexuality. Furthermore, while her acquiescence to childbearing seems to contradict her earlier horror at the prospect of reproduction, that horror in fact lays the groundwork for Larsen’s depiction of how maternity ultimately causes deep suffering for Helga. It is significant that this suffering occurs in Alabama. Larsen’s narrator describes the Reverend’s home as “the tiny Alabama town where he was pastor to a scattered and primitive flock” (118). Given my discussion of the novel’s engagement with the effects of primitivist images upon black women, the modifier “primitive” here is significant. This word suggests that Helga has moved backwards to an earlier, less developed era, which echoes evolutionist discourse; in the context of American history, this can be seen as a regression from the relatively liberated urban North to the impoverished, segregated rural South. This description of the rural South—along with Larsen’s largely unfavorable depiction—might be read as elitist, or even as implicitly racist. DuCille points out, however that Larsen “critique[d] both the conservative middle class and the primal peasantry” (84). Larsen’s interrogation of dominant values spanned social class and region, as shown by my analysis of her engagement with black bourgeois values. Additionally, Carby draws attention to the significance of these black class tensions in *Quicksand*, noting that the “polarity between rural and urban experience frames the text” (172). Much of the novel’s American settings are the social realms of the black bourgeoisie, and the novel’s ending shift to the rural South emphasizes the “polarity,” or distance, between these worlds. In addition, DuCille argues that Larsen’s depiction of the South can be read as a challenge to the essentialism of the early twentieth-century image of rural, Southern African-Americans communities as more “authentic” than urban Northerners (85). Indeed, this ideology is portrayed in Helga’s initial enjoyment of this setting, for example, “the smallest, dirtiest, brown child, barefooted in the fields or muddy roads, was to her an emblem of the wonder of life, of love, and of God’s goodness” (Larsen 121). Helga is attracted to this rural simplicity, viewing the people as manifesting a genuine, uncomplicated relation to life. Yet this characterization also shows how this idealization can overlook poverty and struggle, shown by the child’s “dirtiness” and “bare feet.” As Helga continues living in this setting and bears the Reverend’s children, she becomes disenchanted, finding that the promises of resolution in marriage and simple living are hollow.

*Quicksand* ends with Helga destroyed by childbearing. While Larsen shows that Helga initially accepts childbearing as the necessary consequence of sexuality, and resigns herself to the gendered expectation of maternity, the text then depicts the subsequent misery this causes Helga and her helpless despair at the situation. DuCille asserts that “few texts in the entire history of African American women’s fiction depict matrimony and childbearing as woman’s ruination more dramatically than Larsen’s *Quicksand*” (110). Indeed, Larsen portrays the roles of wife and mother as imperatives that strictly limit Helga to the functions of her gendered biology. Larsen’s narrator relates that Helga gives birth to three children in under two years and that “the children used her up” (123), thus emphasizing the physical and psychic toll this takes on her. While Helga grows dissatisfied with the demands of caretaking, she becomes pregnant again, and the birth of this child constitutes the point at which she experiences maternity as utterly unbearable and expresses her disillusionment with the maternal role. The narrator describes Helga’s reaction after the intense labor of this birth:

And when, after that long frightfulness, the fourth little dab of amber humanity which Helga had contributed to a despised race was held before her for maternal approval, she failed entirely to respond properly to this sop of consolation for the suffering and horror through which she had passed. There was from her no pleased, proud smile, no loving, possessive gesture…Instead she deliberately closed her eyes, mutely shutting out the sickly infant. (127)

Following this, we learn, “A week she lay so. Silent and listless” (127). Helga’s physical exhaustion, along with her apprehension of the drudgery of caretaking following childbirth, lead to her refusal of conventional displays of maternal joy and of taking care of her newborn infant. In this way, Larsen shows that the instrumentalization to which Helga’s body has been subject—“used up” by the processes of maternity—results in her alienation from the result of her reproduction, her child. The novel thereby challenges the early twentieth-century logic that conceived of motherhood as the biologically determined primary role of women, as Helga does not make the “proper,” or socially sanctioned, maternal response. This scene occurs after the text’s description of Helga’s contention with others’ claims regarding the “naturalness” of motherhood. The Reverend “remind[s]” her that it is “a natural thing, an act of God,” and similarly, Sary Jones, a woman in the church, tells her, “Jes’ remembah et’s natu’al fo’ a ’oman to hab chilluns” (Larsen 125). Both the Reverend and Sary rationalize motherhood as an inevitable, transcendentally dictated condition of womanhood; this rationale thus suggests that Helga should not complain about, or resist, a natural state. The repetition of the word “natural” here shows that, whether it derives from religious piety or biological determinism, the demarcation of bodily conditions as “natural”—or in other words, as innate and unavoidable—forecloses the potential for sociocultural reconfiguration of these bodily conditions. The narrative placement of Helga’s refusal of maternity as immediately following these assurances emphasizes the fragility, and potential for harm, of this thought.

In addition, this critique of maternity is accompanied by echoes of Helga’s pessimistic view of racialized motherhood, discussed above. The passage quoted above describes Helga’s infant as the “little dab of amber humanity which Helga had contributed to a despised race.” The text returns to an image of black reproduction as the perpetuation of racial oppression and suffering. Again, the child is figured as raw material, as a “dab” and, elsewhere in the quotation, a “sop,” their appearance primarily described in terms of color, “amber.” Together, these words invoke an image of the infant as fleshy substance, emphasizing Helga’s alienation from the product of her labor and her view of the infant as already dehumanized by racism. Helga can regard the child only through the lens of her “suffering and horror.” The text’s linkage between Helga’s physical and emotional suffering, and the return of her pessimism toward reproduction, draw attention to how gender and racial oppression, situated as biologically conditioned, mutually reinforce each other via the concepts of descent and reproduction.

*Quicksand*’s depiction of Helga’s fatalism toward childbearing can provoke discomfort, as it seemingly suggests that black reproduction is a self-imposed condemnation of future offspring. Indeed, Roberts has shown how historically, the African-American mother has been viewed as a site of blame for black oppression, as she argues: “For three centuries, Black mothers have been thought to pass down to their offspring the traits that marked them as inferior to any white person” (8).[[37]](#footnote-37) However, Larsen’s attention to the suffering endured by Helga herself and to her struggle against stereotypes of black sexuality emphasize that the black mother is not a passive propagator of pathology, but rather that she strives for sexual and personal satisfaction against the sociocultural positioning of her, and her children’s, embodiment. Helga’s attitude toward motherhood, furthermore, is affected by her mixed heritage, which she sees as marking her as a social outcast; her descent heightens her awareness of how reproduction, and the inheritance of physical traits, can delimit one’s opportunities. In these ways, Larsen’s text suggests that it is not reproduction or blackness that condemn Helga and her children, but rather the social conditions of racial oppression—including violence, segregation, and impoverishment—that generate this hopelessness. Roberts argues, “Blaming Black mothers…is a way of subjugating the Black race as a whole,” as “A lurid mythology of Black mothers’ unfitness, along with a science devoted to proving Black biological inferiority, cast Black childbearing as a dangerous activity” (21). *Quicksand*’s attention to Helga’s fear of reproduction shows how racism is naturalized through the idea that racialized reproduction perpetuates inequalities. Helga’s maternal suffering, along with her uneasy relationship with her own descent, highlight how the early twentieth century biopolitical paradigm figures women’s bodies as instruments of racial division. Larsen, through refuting the naturalization of the maternal body, shows the instability of this logic.

The novel’s concluding focus on reproduction therefore continues its overarching concern with how aesthetic and epistemological discourses predetermine the racialized and gendered body. According to Hostetler, “At the mercy of biological processes, Helga’s body, which had once served as a sort of mannequin display in the construction of an identity through clothes, is trapped by the social construction of her biology” (44). Helga’s attention shifts from her aesthetic appearance to the physical demands of motherhood, both of which cloak her underlying repression of sexuality. Helga thereby constantly shifts between accepting the limited terms of her embodiment and attempting to escape its socioculturally imposed demarcations, just as the novel shifts between portraying Helga as an object within a visual frame, such as in the novel’s opening scene or in Olsen’s painting, and representing her pain in childbirth as fragmentary. DuCille claims that Helga is “overcome” by the “irreconcilable social, psychosexual, and racial contradictions that become her quicksand” (96). DuCille’s claim illuminates the importance of considering *Quicksand*’s themes of superficial appearances and maternal suffering together. In this chapter, I have shown how the novel’s shifts between themes of appearances and maternity reveal how biologically determined constructions of the black feminine body circumscribe it as surface and function, as a sign and propagator of racial inequality.

Ultimately, *Quicksand* offers a grim outlook on the possibility of Helga’s escape from these constructions. The novel ends by revealing that, soon after the birth of her fourth child, “she began to have her fifth child” (Larsen 135). In the context of 1920s America, Helga can find no alternatives to the images that others have constructed for her, and in the end, she is caught in the cycle of reproduction. Carby observes that, through the novel’s narrative structure, Larsen “posed a challenge to the readers’ expectations of the form of the novel” (173). Through its zigzagging narrative, the novel refutes tidy resolution and notions of linear progress, as Helga slips into the quicksand of her socially limited options. However, Larsen’s depiction of the underlying instability of the color line and the maternal imperative emphasizes that this structure is neither natural nor inevitable.

In this chapter, I have analyzed Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* in relation to evolutionist discourses of eugenics and anti-miscegenation rhetoric, as well as aesthetic primitivism. Through this analysis, I have shown how these discourses objectify the black female subject in terms of biologically-situated stereotypes of race and gender. Helga’s struggles with the meaning of her mixed-race heritage and with sexual and maternal objectification show how the concept of descent circumscribes race and gender as predetermined categories of inferiority or superiority. My focus on Helga’s experience as a black-identified woman in this chapter provides a gateway to my examination of how evolutionist visions of race and gender permeate Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s and Kate Chopin’s works. Placing these writers’ works into conversation with each other sheds light on how these visions had different consequences for black and white women during this period.

# CHAPTER 4. EXONERATING THE SNAKE: MATERNAL CULTIVATION IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN’S *HERLAND* AND GROUNDED DESCENT IN KATE CHOPIN’S SHORT STORIES

In the late nineteenth century, as science gained authority, the biological distinctions between male and female bodies, and what this meant for questions of equality, gender roles, and the relation between the sexes, were interpreted and contested. In Chapter 2, I analyzed how Darwin’s articulation of the development of sex (at that time, synonymous with gender) differences configured women as undeveloped in relation to men and as material instruments of racialized descent. My analysis of Larsen’s *Quicksand* in Chapter 3 demonstrated the ways in which the turn-of-the-century evolutionist organization of race and gender via descent objectified black women and weighted their sexuality and maternity with stereotypes of primitivism and pathology. In this chapter, I extend these discussions by turning my attention to white women writers’ responses to evolutionist discourse. I first establish that first-wave white feminists in the late nineteenth century welcomed evolutionist discourse as a means of refuting the misogynist Adam and Eve myth. In addition, I discuss how the evolutionist narrative of linear progress affects turn-of-the-century visions of women’s maternal role within this timeline. This sets the stage for my analysis of literary works by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin, both documented readers of Darwin and other evolutionary scientists. While Larsen’s *Quicksand* portrays Helga as oppressed by evolutionist visions of race and gender, Gilman’s and Chopin’s whiteness—in other words, their absence of markers of racial inferiority—result in distinct engagement with the significance of these visions for women’s maternity and sexuality. I argue, first, that Gilman’s utopian novel *Herland* appropriates hegemonic evolutionary visions of race and civilization to advance a eugenicist logic of feminist progress. Second, Chopin’s portrayal of racialized characters in her Louisiana-set short stories present ambiguities about the Southern racial hierarchy and racialized maternity, and moreover, emphasize humans’ material kinship with nature.

Late nineteenth-century discursive attention to embodied difference was closely linked to the transatlantic circulation of Darwinian evolutionary ideas, as demonstrated by the popularity—among both scientists and lay readers—of Darwin’s *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). This text’s focus on sexual selection as a key mechanism of evolution, in particular, provoked interest in how evolutionary biology can explain sex differentiation, sexual relationships, and the significance of reproduction, and concomitantly, what these explanations suggest about women’s positions in society. Today, Darwinian sexual selection appears to support, whether intentionally or not, patriarchal views of men as active providers and women as passive reproducers. While this view of sexual selection is indeed evident in both Darwin’s text and in popular contemporary interpretations, feminist responses at the time were more complicated. Many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminists saw Darwinian sexual selection as a welcome refutation of Christian doctrine of feminine submission. Moreover, Darwin’s attention to animal courtship in the *Descent* provided pathways for conceiving of human female sexuality in more active terms.

These turn-of-the-century feminist responses to Darwinism thus complicate interpretations of evolutionary theory as a scientific analog of misogynist gender roles, although this does not necessarily diminish the latent sexism in Darwin’s texts nor resolve questions of biological essentialism. The fact that the most enthusiastic feminist proponents of Darwinian evolution were white women who engaged in racist and eugenicist rhetoric further demonstrates the fraught role of evolutionary theory in modern visions of racial and gender hierarchy. This relay between feminist reconfiguration of evolutionary discourse and affirmation of its more racist interpretations reveals how the potential radicalism of evolutionary discourse was mitigated by its amenability to hegemonic white patriarchy. In American feminist responses to evolutionary theory, the contexts of tension between evolutionist discourse and traditional American Protestantism, as well as the racist animosity after the Civil War and in the wake of immigration, enabled evolutionary theory’s attractiveness for white middle-class feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Biological claims of racial and gender differences were thus uneasily reconciled between hegemonic patriarchy and feminist responses.

Therefore, the links between Darwinian sexual selection, women’s position in the evolutionist scheme, and the role of reproduction in turn-of-the-century white feminist theory provide important context for examining women’s literary responses to Darwin’s *Descent of Man*. Gilman embraced eugenic social Darwinism as a means for white women’s uplift. Meanwhile, Kate Chopin recognized how Darwin contributes a more dynamic, less dogmatic view of biological life, specifically sexual relations, while at the same time, demonstrates unease, and sometimes inconsistent views, about the significance of racial descent and imperatives of motherhood in this new view of life. Both Gilman and Chopin are documented as avid readers of Darwin, and I analyze their fiction for traces—both clear and subtle—of this readership. Focusing on these writers’ fiction allows me to address some of the most complex and occasionally troubling feminist engagements with Darwinian discourse. In particular, my focus on some of Chopin’s lesser-studied short stories reveals also facilitates more understanding of the role of race in her work, which has important consequences for interpretations of her more well-known works, including her novel, *The Awakening*. Moreover, the compression of the short story form facilitates spaces for ambiguity and refusal of closure, and thus constitutes a narrative form that resists the progress and resolution favored by white and/or patriarchal mobilizations of Darwinism. Similar to Nella Larsen’s restless narrative in *Quicksand*, the ambiguities and gaps of Chopin’s short stories suggest how nonlinear narratives can work as feminist counterpoints to patriarchal narratives of progress.

In her short fiction, Chopin’s concerns with animality and nature, the passing of time, and motherhood and sexuality demonstrate a literary, thematic contention with the major motifs of Darwin’s works. While these concerns are consistent throughout Chopin’s texts, and indeed evident in *The Awakening*, tracing them across different stories, and in relation to evolutionary thought, reveals sometimes paradoxical suggestions. Chopin’s stories advance naturalistic affirmations of women’s sexuality, yet they waver in their implications about how this sexuality is situated in relation to reproduction and motherhood. Furthermore, her views on race and the white-black color line both interrogate, and affirm, popular evolutionist views of racial difference as biologically immutable, thus demonstrating the American South’s fraught reworking of the color line in the wake of the Civil War. Regarding this context, Amy Branam Armiento notes that “in 1893, as racial tension increased in Louisiana and initiatives were sought to reinstitute the separation of the races with the introduction of Jim Crow laws,” Chopin wrote short stories that featured characters and plots grappling with the Southern color line (48). The thematic concerns and contradictions of Chopin’s stories, therefore, show the pervasive influence of evolutionary discourse on late nineteenth-century American literary thinking about women’s bodies in biological time. Chopin’s texts in relation to Gilman’s demonstrate, furthermore, that white women’s responses to this discourse cannot be reduced to a single conclusion.

The interplay between these women writers’ engagement with evolutionist discourse, their race and class positions, and their resistance of masculine science’s circumscription of women’s roles shows how the entanglement of evolutionist discourse with its American context led these writers to grapple with the evolutionary story’s implications for human difference, and to isolate reproduction as a major force in this scheme, to both their advantage and disadvantage.

## Darwinian Sexual Selection and First-Wave Feminism

The popularity of *The Descent of Man* among the late nineteenth-century American reading public echoes the interest of turn-of-the-century women writers and feminists in evolutionist concepts of sex, courtship, and reproduction, and their enactment in fiction of how these concepts affect relationships between women and men and women’s societal positioning. As I discussed in Chapter 2, in the *Descent*, Darwin advances two linked arguments: first, demonstrating humans’ shared kinship with animals and second, tracing sexual selection as the primary cause of sex differentiation. These arguments, as they challenged religious orthodoxy, human exceptionalism, and Victorian morality, were scandalous for their nineteenth-century audience, and thus the potential controversy this text generated explains readers’ intense interest in it. According to Kimberly Hamlin, on both sides of the Atlantic, “Regardless of whether or not readers accepted Darwin’s arguments in *The Descent of Man*, all agreed that the book was a literary sensation and a must-read,” as shown by its coverage in popular periodicals (10). Moreover, Hamlin identifies women as a major constituency of this readership; for instance, *The Descent of Man* “appeared on prominent book lists for women’s and girls’ clubs until the turn of the twentieth century, and the *New York Times* reported that it was among the most popular books checked out of Manhattan public libraries as late as 1895” (11). Darwin’s elaboration of sexual selection, then, was circulated widely among American readers, whether they accepted his arguments or not, and therefore permeated understandings—both scientific and layperson, patriarchal and feminist—of how biology and the evolutionary timeline shaped, and continued to affect, sex difference and male-female relationships.

To understand how nineteenth-century discourse and feminist responses positioned women within evolutionary temporality, the significance of its narrative structuring must be emphasized. Venla Oikkonen, in an article analyzing the implicit narratives of contemporary advertising for genetic ancestry tests and their gendered ideologies, argues for the usefulness of feminist narrative analysis, particularly concerning texts about science. Oikkonen describes narrative as “an effective technology of knowledge” (“Narrative” 299) and further argues that narratives “are embedded in the working of ideology both through their discursive content and the historically specific ideological investments implicit in their very structures” (“Narrative” 299). As my analysis in Chapter 1 of the narrative structuring of the *Origin* showed, narrative is a “technology of knowledge” because it enables the organization of information and processes into a cohesive framework, in which actions have a clear cause-and-effect sequence within a larger whole. Consequently, as Oikkonen observes, attention to narrative allows analysis of both “discursive content” and “structures,” which thereby deepens our understanding of how form itself enacts ideology. The structure of narrative is especially germane to turn-of-the-century evolutionist thought, as the processes of biological evolution occur over long periods of time, and moreover, cultural responses to the evolutionist scheme were preoccupied with how evolutionist temporality affects humankind’s imagining of its past and its future, and hence the meaning of its present.

For feminists and women writers, the evolutionary story, with its emphasis on how women are at once the embodied maternal bearers of humanity’s development through time and the inferior vestiges of its past, was compelling in the kinds of stories it both made possible and foreclosed. According to Oikkonen, “The strength of narrative analysis lies in [its] ability to move between structure and context, to identify constraints in how narratives are poised between origins and futures, how only particular kinds of narrative trajectories appear as conceivable, and how assumptions about gender become naturalized” (“Narrative,” 306). Following Oikkonen, tracing women writers’ responses to the evolutionist story of descent in their own narratives reveals how “gender becomes naturalized” in terms of its embodied function in time, and also how the evolutionary story about the “origins” of sex and sexuality opened up diverse visions of the future. Oikkonen’s argument also sheds light on how, just as biology seems to “naturalize” or justify gender ideology, so do conventional narrative structures appear to make only certain kinds of stories and their concomitant ideologies “conceivable.” In the *Descent*, Darwin’s elaboration of sexual selection and differentiation takes the Victorian story about manhood and womanhood as the only possible story about the biology of gender.

The fact that Darwin locates sexual selection as one of the main mechanisms by which the races differentiated, as I discussed in Chapter 2, demonstrates that feminist reckoning with the place of gender and sex in Darwinian sexual selection must also contend with how racial difference is situated in relation to gender. For Darwin, sexual selection—which mainly has to do with reproduction as a motivating force—both causes, and verifies, racial and sex differentiation, based on the principles of attraction and procreation. Taking into account Gilman’s and Chopin’s positions as white women thus helps to illuminate their contention with evolutionist ideas.

The evolutionist paradigm of reproduction as the ultimate goal of sexual activity, and of life itself, is underwritten by the maternal objectification of women. Judith Roof uses psychoanalytic accounts of narrative as a gateway for examining the exchange between sexuality and narrative structure, particularly from the late nineteenth century onward. Roof argues that in traditional narrative, the endpoint is emphasized as the motivation, and determinant, of narrative as a whole, and this all-determining end has to do with the endings of life processes. According to Roof, “at the end of the orgasmic story, the coalition of reproduction and death situates the two in an ambivalent relation, reproduction staving off death and death the simultaneous enemy and/or product of reproduction, and both the outcome of coming” (20). Narrative and sexuality exist in a co-constitutive dynamic, as both are driven toward an all-encompassing ending in climax and reproduction. Roof explains that this relay between sex, death, and reproduction as the terminus of narrative often works via metaphor. I argue that her analysis enables further understanding of how the relay between these processes and their role in narrative are literally manifest in the Darwinian story. Sex, death, and reproduction are interwoven as constitutive of the all-determining end, and the evolutionist story is part of this same fabric. In this story, organic development is pushed onward by sexuality and life, which terminate in death and reproduction; death and reproduction are the end, but also the necessary mechanisms for new beginnings and further development.

This narrative structure relies upon heteronormativity and its accompanying gender roles. Roof explains, “As a basic category of difference, gender is thus also a basic functional category of narrative” (70), and further, “The interplay of sameness and difference…characterizes our ideology of narrative but requires for its deployment a coexistent heterosexual ideology by which its terms are organized into sense” (71). In other words, if narrative enacts a structured unfolding of events that end in climax and reproduction, which in turn provide the basis for a new beginning, then gender is a “functional category of narrative” because the union, or bringing together of difference, of heterosexuality enables the climactic conclusion and its synthesis in reproduction, which, as an antidote to the ending of death, enables further perpetuation of the narrative cycle. This underpinning “heterosexual ideology,” via its negotiation of difference and its resolution in climax, reproduction, and death, thus allows narrative to make “sense.” The evolutionist paradigm of development, and its emphasis on sexual difference and reproduction as crucial mechanisms of evolution toward higher forms, takes shape in this modern heterosexist narrative. Roof’s analysis, therefore, illuminates the significance and functioning of narrative structure in the modern evolutionist paradigm, and further, how this narrative provides a framework, and inspiration, for other narratives concerned with the interrelation of sex, death, and reproduction and their gendered dynamics. Indeed, literary texts produced during the same period in which evolutionist discourse about sex and race flourished pick up on this dynamic infusing narrative, as Gillian Beer and Bert Bender have discussed. I argue that women’s narrative responses to evolutionist narratives of sex and reproduction adopt, interrogate, and rearrange these terms of sex and reproduction and their narrative formation.

However, while Darwin’s confidence in male superiority epitomizes biological essentialism and seems like anathema to feminist goals, in the late nineteenth century, American white feminist writers viewed this discourse as a potential channel for their own arguments. They understood the evolutionist narrative not as a story to be rejected, but rather as one to be rewritten.[[38]](#footnote-38) This provides key context for Gilman’s and Chopin’s renegotiations of the evolutionist narrative’s positioning of women within this narrative’s timeline of reproduction and mastery. Late nineteenth-century feminists’ flexible accommodation of evolutionism occurred for several reasons. First, as Erika Lorraine Milam shows, sexual selection’s emphasis on female choice in animals—especially birds’ mating rituals in which the female chooses her mate—garnered skepticism from male scientists but intrigued women readers (953).

Second, and of key significance in considering how narratives of evolution were fashioned and refashioned, Darwinian evolution helped to rebut orthodox views of creation. For instance, in *The Woman’s Bible* (1895), Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote:

The real difficulty in woman’s case is that the whole foundation of the Christian religion rests on her temptation and man’s fall, hence the necessity of a Redeemer and a plan of salvation. As the chief cause of this dire calamity, woman’s degradation and subordination were made a necessity. If, however, we accept the Darwinian theory, that the race has been a gradual growth from the lower to a higher form of life, and that the story of the fall is a myth, we can exonerate the snake, emancipate the woman, and reconstruct a more rational religion for the nineteenth century. (214)

As Penelope Deutscher notes of other feminist writers who employed evolutionist discourse (47), Stanton relies here upon the language of the higher and the lower, therefore unquestioningly accepting dominant evolutionist discourse of racialized progress. Hamlin identifies feminist writers—such as Gilman, Stanton, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, and Eliza Burt Gamble—who employed evolutionary theory as “Darwinian feminists,” noting that they “tended to be white, middle or upper class, [and] educated,” and were influential because they “published widely” and “held powerful posts” (16). Hamlin adds that in turn-of-the-century America, “To many observers, feminism and Darwinism were bound together as examples of new ideas that threatened to disrupt the traditional order” (33), largely due to their common repudiation of the Adam and Eve story. The trope of the Garden of Eden was problematic for both: “Feminism and Darwinism also shared a crucial link in that both necessitated a reevaluation of the Genesis creation story. For women to gain more rights and opportunities, old associations with Eve needed to be cast away; likewise, for those who took Darwinian evolution seriously, a reconsideration of the literal Garden of Eden was also in order” (Hamlin 33). Feminist writers were attracted to the evolutionist story because it provided an alternative to Eve, the doctrinal basis for women’s inferiority, and helped to reveal its fictional status.

Deutscher further supports this interpretation in her analysis of Blackwell, Gamble, and Gilman. Deutscher observes that with evolutionary theory, “feminists could now deem traditional views about the proper roles of the sexes unscientific and irrational, protected only by the weight of history and belief,” as “the nature and roles of men and women were now to be renegotiated only on the basis of their scientific validity and only according to rational criteria” (37). Therefore, although Darwin and others did little to support women’s equality, their revised story of origins and scientific methodology provided a new framework and means for feminist arguments.

Along with this rewriting of origins, evolutionary theory accommodated feminist visions of the future. Feminist deployment of evolutionist narrative occurred across the Atlantic, as Rita Felski demonstrates. Felski argues that European feminists appropriated the evolutionist narrative of progress, claiming that “women’s emancipation…would further the course of evolution, while their containment within the home could only exacerbate social decline” (155). Therefore, Felski argues, “The positioning of women at the heart of evolutionary theory was…a provocative act because it disrupted the traditionally masculine lineage of teleological history” (156). Evolutionary theory was useful to feminists because it enabled them to insert women as indispensable actors in Western historical development. According to this logic, the human race’s future development—the assumed goal of evolution—was hindered by women’s exclusion from the public sphere: a canny feminist move both in its rewriting of “teleological history” and in its appeal to common values beyond women’s interests.

However, this feminist appropriation also required that the turn-of-the-century deployment of evolutionism remain decidedly white. If women figured themselves as helping to forestall “social decline,” then according to the period’s discourses of degeneration, they had to locate this decline in racialized bodies. This feminist narrative of progress, while a revision of masculine history, nonetheless relied upon the positioning of racialized lines of descent lower in the scale or earlier in history as the threatening specter of slippage from developed white civilization As I show below, Gilman advances such a viewpoint of progress in *Herland*.

This leads to the third reason for the appeal of evolutionist theory to white feminists: Darwin’s attention to sexuality and reproduction as key mechanisms of evolution encouraged feminist writers to imagine women as exercising greater agency through their embodied roles in these processes. Darwin’s elaboration of sexual selection acknowledges, by necessity, the existence of female sexuality. Darwin attempts to cling to Victorian notions of women as passive objects of courtship, yet the foundation of his argument rests upon an understanding of sexual drives encompassing all organic being and detached from conventional morality, which thus inspired the new disciplines of psychoanalysis and sexology in the late nineteenth century. Bert Bender and Gillian Beer trace Darwin’s influence on new approaches to courtship, marriage, and reproduction in, respectively, late nineteenth-century American and British literature. According to Bender, the *Descent* “powerfully disrupted the Victorian sense of order” by “demystifying” sex (16). Meanwhile, Beer claims, “For Darwin love-intrigues and the marriage market involve the future of the human race. It is this brooding on generation and extinction beyond the lot of the individual which freights such topics with new weight and new resistances” (199). Bender and Beer agree on evolutionary theory’s strong influence on the period’s literary writers, especially in their attention to the persistent narrative concerns of marriage and reproduction. Bender suggests the possibility of evolutionary theory as enabling more libertine, or at least less moralistic, depictions of sexuality. Beer adopts a more cautious stance toward evolutionism’s effects on literary narrative’s contention with sex. She points toward how the evolutionist paradigm engenders consideration of “love” and “the marriage market” within a broader scope of human time. Evolutionism’s attention to the past and the future of the race move the import of marriage beyond immediate concerns and even beyond the next generation. Beer’s identification of this view’s “new weight and new resistances” is instructive—in the context of Victorian sexual and gender norms, evolution enabled both “resistance” toward conventional, religious morality and new “weight,” in terms of future significance, for normative regulations of sexuality and reproduction.

Therefore, evolutionism shifted intellectual and literary discourses of gender and sexuality by providing a pragmatic, naturalistic framework that both encouraged freedom from dogma and furnished new evidence for emphasizing reproduction, and hence women’s bodies, as vehicles, or obstacles, of white progress. These tensions in the turn-of-the-century intellectual and feminist circulation of evolutionist ideas permeate Gilman’s and Chopin’s works. Due to its significance in the evolutionist narrative, reproduction was a particular issue of interest for women writers. According to Dana Seitler, “The figure of the mother emerged with new meaning and significance at the fin de siècle as a privileged site of material and biological value” (176). In this view, woman, vis-à-vis motherhood, was a “site” of “value” because she had the unique position of bearing and nurturing the future of the race. Indeed, Seitler notes that white supremacy was the ineluctable backbone of this view, as the mother’s significance was grounded in “eugenic conceptualizations” that “served certain white feminist goals” (176). As I have shown, the evolutionist narrative of progress provided the basis for this feminist appropriation of eugenics discourse. In turn-of-the-century American feminist thought, then, the feminist mobilization of evolutionary theory challenged the religious and social construction of women’s oppression and simultaneously accepted biological racial hierarchy. The elevation of women’s social role via her embodied maternal capacity is intrinsically linked to the idea of race as consisting of distinct lines of descent.

The apparently contradictory stance between feminism and racism is clearest in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s fiction and nonfiction. Recently, the vexed racial dimensions of Gilman’s feminism have drawn scholarly analysis, particularly by Deutscher, Seitler, Gail Bederman, and Alys Eve Weinbaum. I further explore it here because Gilman’s work most clearly demonstrates the difficult reconciliations between evolutionary theory, feminist goals, and racist biopolitics in turn-of-the-century American literature and thought. Moreover, Gilman was quite influential due to her multitude of publications and lectures; to underscore her influence, Weinbaum describes her as “a transatlantic phenomenon” (65). By examining the arguably didactic shape of Gilman’s narrative in *Herland*, we can further see the nuances and ambiguities of Chopin’s contention with these issues.

## Children Cultivated Like Roses: Gilman’s Eugenic Narrative of Maternal Civilization

Near the end of Gilman’s utopian novel *Herland*, the narrator, Van Jennings, remarks of the inhabitants of the all-female nation, “They were deeply aroused on the subject of evolution; indeed, the whole field of natural science drew them irresistibly” (144). Over the course of the novel, Van, an American sociologist who has entered the hidden nation with two other male explorers, has willingly embraced the society—even marrying one of its citizens—and its communal emphasis on maternity and childrearing as instruments of progress. When Van remarks upon the women’s interest in evolution, he and his wife, Ellador, are leaving Herland to explore the world and travel to the United States. This occasion prompts him to reflect upon how Ellador’s exposure to the “family of nations” (Gilman 144), or the diversity of human groups, will kindle her scientific imagination. Gilman’s nod toward evolution as a subject of intense interest for women concerned with maternal progress and curious about human biodiversity points to the rich exchange between evolutionary theory and white feminist discourse in the early twentieth century. Moreover, within the context of this scene at the novel’s conclusion, this reference crystallizes how *Herland*’s major themes reveal the tensions at the heart of early twentieth-century feminist appropriations of evolutionist discourse.

Gilman’s novel is radical in its portrayal of women as rational, capable scientists and educators and its affirmation of maternal labor’s value. At the same time, the depiction of Herland’s population as isolated and the “family of nations” as a collection of interesting specimens exposes the logic of white racial purity running through the text, which is underscored by Van’s reference to the “poison-arrow natives down below” the mountains of Herland (Gilman 144). These two impulses in the novel are not separate, but rather part of the same thread of tension, joined by Gilman’s unceasing promotion of maternity as a uniquely feminine tool of progress. The women’s capacity to reproduce parthenogenically turns Darwinian sexual selection and its traditional gender roles on its head, yet the text’s exaltation of maternity also pivots on the purified line of descent embodied by the women. These tensions between feminist agency and racial purity together produce an ideology of rationalized feminist eugenics. In fact, I draw attention to the novel’s recurring images of cultivated land and references to selectively bred animals as crucial manifestations of Gilman’s endorsement of eugenics ideology; in advocating for regulation of organic matter as a method of progress, the novel reflects a colonialist view in which civilization is achieved through mastery of untamed nature and supposed “savagery.” The Herlanders’ desexualized status further supports this ideology, as the disavowal of sexuality is apparently necessary for the success of their rational progress. Just as the women cultivate their gardens and tame their forests, they prudently cultivate their future bloodline.

Gilman was not unusual among her contemporaries for her dual engagement with feminist goals and racist rhetoric. Some feminist scholars today, such as Hamlin, argue that, while the racism of first-wave white feminists should be acknowledged, it also should not devalue their feminist contributions. *Herland* was first serially published in Gilman’s self-published periodical *The Forerunner* (1915) and was republished as a novel in 1978 (Lane v-vi).

Since *Herland*’s republication, critics have typically hailed it as a feminist novel due to its idealization of an all-female nation—for instance, Anne J. Lane admiringly describes the novel’s utopia as “a world in which humane social values have been achieved by women in the interest of us all” (xxiii). However, I argue that this presumption of “us all” must be interrogated. Certainly, Gilman’s racialized rhetoric, such as her references to “savages” in *Herland* (2-3), should be placed within its historical context as typical of the period’s attitudes among white Americans. However, I argue that placing Gilman’s utopian novel in conversation with the evolutionary narrative of progress reveals how the feminist attempt to wield hegemonic biological discourse was weighted with the dominant evolutionist paradigm’s hierarchical racial scale of lines of descent.

Indeed, even for the period, Gilman’s racism was overt. It is not only woven throughout *Herland*, but also clear in her large body of nonfiction writings, in which she explicitly describes African-Americans as uniquely “backward” and endorses nativist policies.[[39]](#footnote-39) According to historian Gail Bederman, “Gilman’s attack on male dominance had depended on the argument that the shared racial bonds between civilized men and civilized women far outweighed primitive, animalistic, sexual difference” (169). Bederman’s analysis is echoed by Louise Michele Newman, who explains, “Gilman believed that whites were a superior race because they had created an advanced civilization” (133-34) and “for her, white supremacy was entirely consistent with a belief in equality between the sexes” because white women shared white men’s civilized status (134). In other words, Gilman’s argument for gender equality was specifically grounded in her conviction that white women’s capacity to exist as fully civilized equals with white men was hindered by their social confinement to the home. This confidence in white women’s equality with white men was informed, in turn, by Gilman’s belief that nonwhite people were intrinsically incapable of developing toward or participating in civilization (Bederman 146). This ideology of “advanced civilization” as a marker of full, rational humanity and belief that white women needed to participate in this advancement is the underlying logic of *Herland*. Van is in constant awe of the highly civilized structure of Herland; Gilman’s fictional history of this nation emphasizes that the explicitly white matrilineal citizenry, free from patriarchal domination, have made possible this state of advancement.

In response to feminist arguments to lay aside Gilman’s racism in her nonfiction writing as a product of its time, Deutscher posits, “Is the implication that we should charitably imagine her text minus this element? If so, we should recognize how thoroughly these feminisms rely on their depiction of the ‘savage’” (49). I want to follow Deutscher’s suggestion here, as well as scholarship by Bederman, Newman, Weinbaum, and Seitler that interrogates Gilman’s union of feminism with eugenic racism. Gilman’s eugenic feminist inclinations are described by Weinbaum as “maternalist racial nationalism” (62) and by Seitler as “coterminous ideologies of feminism and eugenics” (178) enacted in “regeneration narratives” (180). In addition, I examine how Gilman challenges biological essentialism of women’s inferiority but is limited by her reliance on maternity as the engine of Western progress. I show that the text’s focus on the land as carefully cultivated is part of its logic of eugenic regulation of maternal bodies. In the context of evolutionist discourse, the Herlanders’ employment of artificial selection allows them to avoid the unpredictable, potentially contaminating results of natural and sexual selection. In *Herland*, maternal bodies are sites of control for the future of the nation, and thus Gilman creates a story of a eugenic utopia that follows a conventional narrative path toward future resolution and reproduction. Placing *Herland* alongside Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* demonstrates that, despite evolutionism as the common root of embodied maternal instrumentalization, these narratives of maternity starkly differ for their white and black subjects. For the Herlanders, maternity is a source of pride and progress and is divorced from sexuality; meanwhile, Larsen’s Helga struggles against others’ presumptions of her hypersexuality and is socially and physically condemned by her childbearing.

Gilman depicts the citizens of Herland as self-sufficient, intellectually curious, and physically capable. In these ways, she challenges male scientists’ claims of women’s innate intellectual and physical inferiority and shows that the idea of woman as an “underdeveloped man” arises from social assumptions and structures. When the social context of patriarchy is stripped away, the Herlanders are free to progress toward civilized heights. This story is mediated by the narrator, Van, who describes himself at the novel’s start: “sociology’s my major. You have to back that up with a lot of other sciences, of course. I’m interested in them all” (Gilman 2). Bernice Hausman notes, “For Gilman’s purposes, Van is the perfect narrator—a ‘rational’ social scientist, he cannot deny the civilized progress of Herland” (495). By establishing Van as interested in “all” sciences, Gilman emphasizes his credibility in evaluating Herland’s perfection, and at the same time, uses his point of view to highlight, and consequently counter, masculine assumptions about womanhood. Van is accompanied by Terry, a wealthy, chauvinistic explorer who is disappointed by the women’s lack of sexual interest, and Jeff, a botanist and chivalrous Southern gentleman, who deeply respects the women yet unwittingly condescends to them. Van is the neutral, scientific observer between these masculine types, and therefore functions as a proxy for the reader, his awe at the women’s advancement intended to accordingly impress the reader.

Gilman uses the tension between the men’s socially codified assumptions and the actual conditions of Herland to emphasize the barriers created by these assumptions. This tension is explicitly shown when Van, after learning more about the nation, reflects on how Herland has upended their expectations: “We had been cocksure as to the inevitable limitations, the faults and vices, of a lot of women” (Gilman 81). This statement is followed by a list of the specific expectations that have been countered:

We had expected a dull submissive monotony, and found a daring social inventiveness far beyond our own, and a mechanical and scientific development fully equal to ours. We had expected pettiness, and found a social consciousness besides which our nations looked like quarreling children—feebleminded ones at that. We had expected jealousy, and found a broad sisterly affection, a fair-minded intelligence, to which we could produce no parallel. We had expected hysteria, and found a standard of health and vigor, a calmness of temper, to which the habit of profanity, for instance, was impossible to explain—we tried it. (Gilman 81)

This careful cataloging of Herland’s merits is significant not only for showing how Van’s expectations have been upended and exceeded, but also for how it turns upon the contrast between emotion and rationality and directly inverts its period’s association of these modes with the gender binary. Van’s list of expected descriptors—“dull submissiveness,” “pettiness,” “jealousy,” and “hysteria”—are all characteristics that, as I noted in my Introduction and Chapter 2, Darwin and other scientists saw as inherent aspects of womanhood, rooted in the belief in women’s uncontrollable emotionalism. Gilman had already shown the danger of the “hysteric” designation in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and here she extends this argument to emphasize women’s capability for rationality, in both “scientific development” and “social consciousness.” Indeed, Van admits that most of these achievements have surpassed patriarchal Western civilization, which is suggestive of a claim that Gilman made in *Women and Economics* and her other nonfiction: that the oppression of women stifles not just women, but all of human development. Gilman, therefore, challenges scientific inscriptions of female inferiority, but rather than rejecting them, harnesses their elevation of rationality and narrative of progress to argue for women’s equality. In her nonfiction, Gilman similarly deploys evolutionary theory to argue against its views on women; regarding this maneuver, Russett claims, “Gilman had a talent for accepting the premises of men like Darwin and Spencer and exploding their perspectives to arrive at wickedly revolutionary conclusions” (13). Van serves a parallel function in *Herland*, as Gilman entrusts her depiction of Herland’s achievements to his scientific vantage point, using it to show how liberation from patriarchy enables women’s rational advancement.

However, Gilman’s demonstration of feminine potential is explicitly circumscribed as white, and in fact, distinct from the “savages” immediately outside Herland. As I showed at the beginning of this section, Van refers to the “poison-arrow natives down below” Herland. Gilman places the “natives” in the jungle, geographically below the mountains and cultivated lands of Herland, as also shown at the beginning of the novel when the men commence their venture and speak of the “savages” in this area (Gilman 2-3). Through this geographical mapping, Gilman literalizes the indigenous population’s position in the racial hierarchy and so spatially establishes the women’s higher racial status. Although the novel does not specifically identify Herland’s location, its references to the men’s reaching it by sea and to its mountains and sunlight suggests South America (Gilman 2-3).

Gilman ensures, however, that the reader does not assume the Herlanders are non-Western others and clarifies that they are in fact white. When Van learns of the women’s origins as part of a group that had reached the present land by sea, he reflects, “there is no doubt in my mind that these people were of Aryan stock, and were once in contact with the best civilization of the old world. They were ‘white,’ but somewhat darker than our northern races because of their constant exposure to sun and air” (Gilman 54). This racial positioning echoes Gilman’s views expressed in her nonfiction, in which, according to Deutscher, “The trope of the savage is appropriated as the benchmark against which the feminist measures the status of women. According to Gilman, women have been limited to a savage-like state when confined to the home” (48). Gilman’s approximation of the oppressed white women to the savage or primitive is supported by Seitler’s insightful analysis of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Seitler draws attention to the narrator’s crawling “on all fours” (184) and claims that the suggestion of the narrator’s degeneration to this primitive state relays “the argument…that without sexual equality, the woman’s body (and therefore her reproductive function) degenerates, thus disabling her role as a healthy reproducer of the social world” (185). Gilman participated in the discourse of her period that viewed “degeneration” toward a lower “primitive” state as a racially figured threat and used this threat as the metaphorical embodiment of white women’s oppressed position. The civilized women of Herland represent the potential for women beyond patriarchy, and their whiteness is a central signifier of this vision. The women’s descent from “Aryan stock” and historical proximity to “the best civilization” is important for Gilman’s narrator to note because it allows Gilman to assert that these women share equal status with civilized white men—and, thus, by extension, that all white women should be recognized for this equal status and have freedom to participate in civilization-building.

Gilman’s attention toward the white origins of Herland, moreover, constitutes a key part of the text’s preoccupation with the purity of matrilineal descent. Van knows the women are still Aryan and have not reproduced with the natives, as the women’s parthenogenic reproductive capacity assures the whiteness of their bloodline. The Herlanders’ parthenogenic capacity and maternal ideology is the central concern of the text and is at once both feminist and eugenic. It disrupts the gender binary of biological essentialism, as it removes men from the equation and asserts a woman-centered social organization focused on communal childrearing and education. At the same time, maternity’s status as a social imperative renders it, in Gilman’s view, necessarily subject to regulatory social control. The women’s parthenogenic capacity is established when Somel, Van’s tutor, recounts the nation’s origin—to summarize, two thousand years earlier, the colony of the women’s ancestors lost all its men in wars (presumably with the indigenous population) and natural disasters (Gilman 54-55). As the women rebuilt their society without men, Van relates, “for five or ten years they worked together, growing stronger and wiser and more and more mutually attached, and then the miracle happened—one of these young women bore a child” (Gilman 56). This “miracle” establishes the foundation for Herland’s pure bloodline, as the five daughters borne by this woman each produced their own parthenogenic daughters and so on. Gilman emphasizes the singularity of this descent, as Van exclaims, “There you have the start of Herland! One family, all descended from one mother!” (Gilman 57). This narrative of origins and linear descent is permeated by the period’s evolutionist logic and eugenic values: Gilman locates the exceptionality of the women’s society in their biological history and emphasizes their singular—and thus uncontaminated—descent from “one mother.”

Herland’s absence of men allows Gilman to argue for the advantages of a mother-centered and woman-run society. In doing so, Gilman depicts the Herlanders as lacking traditionally “feminine” qualities, thereby suggesting that these qualities are nonessential. Van remarks, “Here you have human beings, unquestionably, but what we were slow in understanding was how these ultra-women, inheriting only from women, had eliminated not only certain masculine characteristics, which of course we did not look for, but so much of what we had always thought essentially feminine” (Gilman 57). Similar to the quotation, above, about how the women have overturned masculine expectations, Van’s awe of the women’s development is closely linked to their nonfulfillment of traditional feminine stereotypes—what the men “always thought essentially feminine” is not actually intrinsic to womanhood, or humanity more generally. Moreover, this release from traditional femininity allows the Herlanders to evolve into “ultra-women,” further emphasizing how their society’s lack of sex differentiation creates a new order of human. Gilman thus refutes claims of women’s biologically essential inferiority.

From our present perspective, it is tempting to attribute a cultural constructivist paradigm to this refutation. However, this part of Gilman’s text remains rooted in the unity of the social with the biological that typified the intellectual thought of her period, as I noted in my Introduction and Chapter 2, and that pervades the text’s other themes. Hausman demonstrates that Gilman did not have the sex-gender distinction feminist theorists use today, so we cannot ascribe a constructivist view (492). Rather, evolutionist thought informs Gilman’s portrayal of the Herlanders’ absence of essential femininity, as Hausman argues,

Gilman tried to prove that what the men think is a biologically ordained pattern of behavior was, in fact, a convention specifically related to their society and the biohistorical organization of human culture. Thus, in a culture where “sex-distinction” had not existed for thousands of years, because there had been only one sex, the women were not “modified to sex.” They needn’t have been because there was no sexual reproduction, as well as no need to depend upon men for their livelihoods. (500-501)

In other words, Gilman suggests that the removal of dependence on men for sustenance and reproduction—indeed, the complete absence of the gender binary—results in the reduction of sex difference. This logic closely correlates with Darwin’s account of gender dimorphism developing from sexual selection, in which the need to attract mates heightens difference; absent this need, the women develop closer to androgyny, which also recalls Darwin’s positing of an original hermaphroditic ancestor. Through her depiction of the civilized Herlanders, Gilman proposes that sexual differentiation has developed into a hindrance. Ironically, while Gilman asserts the value of civilized progress, she advocates a return to a more balanced state of sex difference to achieve this progress.

The story of Herland’s beginnings in an original mother and its linear maternal development testifies to the novel’s overarching emphasis on motherhood as the instrument of civilized progress. *Herland*’s aggrandizement of maternity is explicitly repeated throughout the text. This is most clearly epitomized in Van’s statement that “Children were the—the *raison d’être* in this country” (Gilman 51), which is further illustrated by Gilman’s portrayal of Herland’s cultural and social structures. *Herland* presents an intriguing alternative to the United States’ rigid education system and lack of public support for mothers. Van describes the children’s education as holistically encouraged by the whole society: “The Herland child was born not only into a world carefully prepared, full of the most fascinating materials and opportunities to learn, but into the society of plentiful numbers of teachers, teachers born and trained, whose business it was to accompany the children along that, to us, impossible thing—the royal road to learning” (Gilman 107). Along with this emphasis on education, the children are provided with a materially and emotionally nurturing environment, rendered in sometimes absurdly hyperbolic terms—Van relates, “I never heard a child cry in Herland, save once or twice at a bad fall” (Gilman 103), and also describes a communal nursery as “a babies’ paradise” (Gilman 107). Scholars have praised Gilman’s re-envisioning of motherhood;[[40]](#footnote-40) for instance, Li-Wen Chang describes the Herlanders as “selfless co-mothers” (325) and further claims, “Herland Mothers educate people as a whole. Their parental bent is natural and instinctual altruism instead of some social product of motherly sacrifice” (331). Indeed, Gilman’s presentation of maternity as a public effort, joined with education to aim at nurturing individual development, provides a revolutionary alternative to patriarchal, capitalist conceptions of motherhood as private and education as rote and product-driven.

These revolutionary suggestions, however, are entangled with Gilman’s focus on maternity as the biological engine of progressive development, which necessarily entails a concern with pure descent that slides into eugenics. By imagining a society in which women become pregnant through parthenogenesis, rather than insemination, Gilman presents pregnancy and maternity as points of conscious control; to clarify this operation, the Herlanders invoke their pregnancies through “concentrated desire,” and similarly, can prevent pregnancy through deliberate “defer[ral]” of this desire (Gilman 70). Indeed, just as Gilman’s analysis of sex difference cannot be disentangled from her consciousness of biology, so the text’s vision of maternity cannot be separated from its eugenic, racialized paradigm. *Herland* clearly locates the women’s communal ethos as part of their project toward racial improvement. For instance, “they had this dominant thought of building up a great race through the children. All the surrendering devotion our women have put into their private families, these women put into their country and race. All the loyalty and service men expect of wives, they gave, not singly to men, but collectively to one another” (Gilman 95). Gilman’s feminist advocacy of collective mothers free from patriarchal authority slips into promotion of “building up a great race,” an objective made possible by the women’s assurance of their pure bloodline. The women’s linear descent is not incidental, nor simply a way to eliminate men, but rather key to Gilman’s racialized vision. Indeed, in the text’s account of Herland’s origins, the line of descent from the original mother is repeatedly emphasized as a distinct race—“founded a new race” is repeated three times in this genesis story (Gilman 56-57), signaling its importance. While Gilman means “race” in the sense of a human population (rather than a specifically demarcated group in the contemporary sense), this emphasis, when situated alongside Gilman’s attention to the women’s whiteness, suggests a preoccupation with racial purity via biological descent.

In addition, this matrilineal race is embedded in a discourse of improvement that closely parallels the evolutionist narrative of progress. Somel explains, “We are at work, slowly and carefully, developing our whole people…It is glorious work—splendid! To see the thousands of babies improving, showing stronger clearer minds, sweeter dispositions, higher capacities” (Gilman 106). Herland’s comprehensive education clearly contributes to this goal of improvement, but again, progressive improvement is a project of the body as well. To improve the race, the Herlanders aim to develop their line of descent; they view biological characteristics as marks of embodied value that codify some descent lines as more or less civilized (i.e., human and rational). As parthenogenic reproduction extends this lineage, the Herland elders have instituted biopolitical regulation of childbirth—in other words, a eugenic regime—to ensure that supposedly superior characteristics are passed on and inferior ones are eliminated. Indeed, Gilman uses distinctly evolutionist and eugenic language to describe this biopolitical regime. In conversation with Somel, Van expresses his accurate understanding of Herland’s system:

“I understand that you make Motherhood the highest social service—a sacrament, really; that it is only undertaken once, by the majority of the population; that those held unfit are not allowed even that; and that to be encouraged to bear more than one child is the very highest reward and honor in the power of the state.” (She interpolated here that the nearest approach to an aristocracy they had was to come of a line of “Over Mothers”—those who had been so honored.) (Gilman 69)

This passage demonstrates how Gilman advocates both positive and negative eugenics in *Herland*—those who are “unfit” are forbidden from transmitting these biologically determined characteristics, while more superior women are encouraged to produce more children to ensure that the perpetuation of their characteristics advance the race’s improvement. Gilman therefore endorses early twentieth century eugenic discourse by locating inferiority or superiority as biologically innate and state regulation of reproduction as a means of ensuring the continuation of “fit” types. Indeed, the existence of the “Over Mothers”—those deemed worthy of bearing more than one child—represents a positive eugenic view that only those people considered the embodiments of civilized potential should be able to reproduce, as this ensures that their offspring will outnumber less-developed offspring. The likening of these Over Mothers to “aristocracy” demonstrates that *Herland* reflects how the hegemonic evolutionist classification of some lines of descent as intrinsically more “fit” took shape in the designation of the middle and upper classes and the white race as inherently more suited to the progress of civilization.

Gilman does not provide many details about what makes a Herlander “unfit” for motherhood. However, Somel explains elsewhere in the text that “We have, of course, made it our first business to train out, to breed out, when possible, the lowest type” and that this applies to a “girl showing bad qualities,” comparing this to Van’s description of “criminals” in America (Gilman 82). The language of the “lowest type” directly reflects evolutionist eugenic discourse: it engages with the idea that “lower” humans are less developed and not yet at the “higher” evolutionary stage and are born with innately “bad qualities” that prevent their ability to evolve toward higher civilization. Gilman, then, in presenting Herland as an ideal, proposes that state regulation of reproduction is the key to solving social problems; the white, highly civilized Herlanders as the models of this ideal and their language of “lower types” further suggests that progress will be achieved by the biopolitical exclusion of racialized bodies from reproduction and motherhood. In this way, Gilman’s maternal regime recalls my discussion of black motherhood in Chapter 3, particularly Dorothy Roberts’ analysis of how white hegemonic discourse projects racial oppression onto black women’s reproduction (Roberts 21). In light of Gilman’s eugenic advocacy, her feminist celebration of cooperative motherhood has a darker underside. The relation between these two impulses is evident in the quotation above, in which motherhood’s status as a “social service” and a “sacrament” is part of the program of racialized eugenic regulation. Seitler places other fictional works by Gilman in the context of her period’s concern with eugenics, and argues that for Gilman and other progressive feminists, “the mother appears as a biological subject organized not so much by a founding maternal identification as by identification with social and moral power, with a desire to participate in the civic-national sphere” (183). In other words, Gilman idealizes motherhood as the biologically determined mechanism by which women can assert “power” and—in the context of nationhood imagined as a body of homogenous civilized subjects—“participate” in nation-building. This idealization is clear in *Herland*, whereby motherhood is constituted as a “social service” because it contributes to the larger social project of reproducing superior racial types and, accordingly, civilized progress.

Gilman’s ideal of eugenic motherhood is further articulated in *Herland*’s language of descent and breeding. This language delineates human bodies’ capacity for civilized development in biologically determined descent. The Herlanders place high value on their lineage, as Somel tells Van of their record-keeping, “Each one of us has our exact line of descent all the way back to our dear First Mother” (Gilman 75). This record-keeping echoes the comparison to aristocracy, above, as the Herlanders’ inscription of “exact” lineage from the original mother assures them of the purity, and hence superiority, of their bloodline. The language of purity and breeding in relation to descent is woven throughout the text. For example, Van describes the Herlanders as “a ‘pure stock’ of two thousand uninterrupted years” and unlike the “irreconcilable” differences of the U.S. population, “these people were smoothly and firmly agreed on most of the basic principles of their life” (Gilman 122). This example is revealing in several ways. By situating this “pure stock” within “two thousand uninterrupted years,” Gilman, writing in the early twentieth century, establishes Herland’s history as an illuminating echo of Western civilization’s common era. Moreover, Gilman not only emphasizes the purity of the Herlanders’ bloodline, but also invokes a narrative of a singular line of descent that has proceeded linearly in pursuit of a progressive future. She thereby explicitly unites the hegemonic evolutionist narrative of linear progress with the turn-of-the-century preoccupation with racial kinship groups and extends them to their logical conclusion. The ideal of white racial purification is achievable through tracing and regulating each subject’s lineage and ensuring no interruption from potential contamination. In this sense, the fantasy of parthenogenic reproduction facilitates a vision of women as active participants in civilized progress, as their exercise of maternal agency ensures that the nation’s biological corpus will remain white.

This biological homogeneity also guarantees the population’s “smooth and firm agreement” by eliminating the turmoil of racial and ethnic difference; Herland’s communal prosperity is made possible by its racial uniformity. According to Weinbaum, Gilman’s description of heterosexual reproduction as akin to miscegenation in *Women and Economics* allows further understanding of her fiction (94). Gilman made this comparison to argue against extreme sex differentiation, but Weinbaum notes that Gilman’s reference to miscegenation and her framing of it as dangerous reveals anxiety about the unpredictable results of heterosexual reproduction. In relation to my examination of how *Herland* reflects its period’s evolutionist discourse of eugenics, Weinbaum’s analysis sheds light on how dominant evolutionist discourse both instrumentalized women and, in attempting to classify the races as biologically distinct, glossed over the evolutionist scheme’s potential affirmation of variety and proliferation. Gilman is aware of how heterosexual intercourse endangers racial purity, and so she eliminates men altogether, which in turn allows her to emphasize the possibility of women’s agency in building civilization. In the evolutionist scheme of descent and reproduction, constructions of race and gender are mutually dependent.

*Herland*’s emphasis on regulation of human reproduction is part of the text’s larger trend of imagining organic cultivation as a method of progress. Gilman’s advocacy of maternal eugenics to ensure an ideal of constantly progressing white nationhood is further developed by *Herland*’s frequent references to cultivation of the land and selective breeding of animals, which become analogs for the Herlanders’ cultivation of the national human body. Hausman claims that “in Herland natural selection continues unimpeded by sexual selection” (496). However, it is more accurate to describe Herland’s evolution as a process of *artificial* selection. As my argument has shown, the absence of sexual selection in Herland ensures the elimination of heterosexual reproduction’s unpredictable results. In the same way, Gilman’s eugenic advocacy safeguards against unpredictability—in other words, the possible risk of degeneration—by directing the course of human evolution. Rather than unimpeded natural selection, the Herlanders engage in artificial selection. Van calls the women “Conscious Makers of People” (65). This capitalized emphasis on “consciousness” and “making” in the task of reproduction is revealing, and this same conscious making is employed in disciplining Herland’s natural environment.

Gilman’s attention to the women’s cultivation of the land and selective breeding of animals illuminates her eugenic argument, as this reveals how *Herland* presents conscious human control of organic development as the path to a civilized human future. Theorists have shown how images of cultivated land and agriculture have helped to constitute the modern Western idea of civilization, since taming wild nature occurs alongside the taming of the human being and the flourishing of culture. This link is clear in the shared root of the words “cultivation” and “culture,” and the early meaning of “culture” to refer to animal husbandry, as Raymond Williams has shown (87-88). In the context of Western colonization, this taming of the land reverberates in the colonizing mission of subduing and assimilating indigenous populations. Robert J.C. Young also elaborates the relay between Western concepts of cultivation and culture:

In English ‘culture’ in its early use was a noun of process, almost, we might say anachronistically, of organic process: the plowing of the earth, the cultivation of crops and animals: “agri-culture.” From the sixteenth century this sense of culture as cultivation, the tending of natural growth, extended to the process of human development: the cultivation of the mind. In the eighteenth century it came to represent also the intellectual side of civilization, the intelligible as against the material. (31)

Additionally, David Amigoni explores how evolutionary discourse influenced this culture-cultivation bind. According to Amigoni, for instance, late nineteenth-century evolutionists and anthropologists, notably Herbert Spencer, identified gardening and cultivation as one of the origins of culture (132-33).

Therefore, Gilman’s emphasis on planned landscapes, gardens, and selective animal breeding is significant because it is underwritten by the idea of organic cultivation as constitutive of white civilization. Images of humanly modified landscapes, gardens, and agricultural plots recur throughout *Herland*. When Van’s group first encounters Herland, Van relates, “We saw…a land in a state of perfect cultivation, where even the forests looked as if they were cared for; a land that looked like an enormous park, only it was even more evidently an enormous garden” (Gilman 11). The likening of the entire land to a “park” or “garden”—specifically human-made features—stresses the Herlanders’ efforts to discipline the land and make it productive and aesthetically attractive for their civilization. In particular, the “forests”—usually associated with wildness—have even been “cared for,” showing the extent to which the Herlanders have achieved “perfect cultivation.” The text later reveals that the Herlanders have tamed their forests by breeding and ordering the trees to function as food sources for nuts and fruit (Gilman 79). The significance of this forest-taming is underlined by the fact that Ellador, the woman Van eventually weds, works as a forester and is an Over-Mother descendant (Gilman 90). In addition to the landscape, Herland animals have also been cultivated. The women have bred their cats “by the most prolonged and careful selection and exclusion” so that the cats do not meow or hunt birds, to enable the Herlanders to enjoy the presence of both cats and birds on their own human terms (Gilman 49). The women’s conscious breeding of the cats clearly constitutes artificial selection; their effort to breed the cats for pleasant qualities that harmonize with their civilization strikingly reflects their biopolitical regulation of the human populace.

In fact, the link between land cultivation and eugenics is explicitly shown in the text. Van remarks, “Here was evidently a people highly skilled, efficient, caring for their country as a florist cares for his costliest orchids” (Gilman 18). Moreover, after Van learns about Herland’s educational organization and reproductive regulation, he states, “Those nation-loved children of theirs compared with the average in our country as the most perfectly cultivated, richly developed roses compare with—tumbleweeds. Yet they did not *seem* ‘cultivated’ at all—it had all become a natural condition” (Gilman 72, emphasis original). In both examples, the text ascribes cultivation to the “country” or “nation” as a whole, thereby suggesting that this civilization’s successful progress necessitates careful regulation of its organic materiality. In the first quotation, “caring for their country” appears to refer to all aspects—human, animal, and plant—working together as a whole, reflecting the text’s merging of the material and the cultural. The women’s cultivation brings materiality in line with the aims of civilized culture. Gilman’s comparison of the country to “orchids” and its children to “roses”—both highly-valued flowers—further emphasizes the women’s superior advancement. The contrast between Herlandian “roses” and American “tumbleweeds” underscores the significance of the text’s cultivation imagery. The carefully bred and tended-to rose against the untamed, unremarkable tumbleweed parallels the text’s presentation of Herland as a utopian ideal of refined, homogenous civilization, coded as white, in contrast to the wild, degenerating diversity of the United States’ multiracial population.

*Herland*’s explicit references to land cultivation and selective breeding thus demonstrate the influence of evolutionist thought on Gilman’s work. The recognition that evolutionary processes of selection work across the categories of human, plant, and animal illustrates the entwinement of “cultivation” and “culture” in Western civilization’s self-image. This entwinement is similar to the double meaning of “domesticity” as it relates to the home, on the one hand, or to tame animals, on the other, and which is explored in the context of Victorian colonialism by Anne McClintock. McClintock argues that “the cult of domesticity…became central to British imperial identity” in a dialectic exchange in which “as domestic space became racialized, colonial space became domesticated” (36). Gilman, of course, advocated against the Victorian ideal of women’s confinement to the private sphere of the home; yet, as she proposes the replacement of the private home with social institutions, the dialectic between domestic and colonial space identified by McClintock is revealing. In *Herland*, these spaces merge as its citizens make the cultivation and tending of the human population and of the landscape part of the same project. Through this project, these spaces—the human nursery, the garden with its docile cats, and the tamed forest—are “racialized” and “domesticated” together, as this domestication purifies *Herland*’s materiality of any wild or savage elements that could pollute the civilized nation. When Van compares Herland’s children to roses, he notes that their cultivation had “become a natural condition.” This statement shows how Gilman’s novel naturalizes advanced civilization as exclusively feminine and white by presenting it as the inevitable, and ideal, outcome of linear progress. The slippage between human cultivation and natural conditions also displays the evolutionist relay between biology and culture that Gilman followed and, moreover, her view that evolutionary development could be mobilized as a human-directed process.

I have discussed, at the start of this chapter, how turn-of-the-century feminists were attracted to evolutionary theory as an alternative to the Christian doctrine of Eve’s sin. Gilman’s gardens in *Herland* demonstrate a feminist response to the Garden of Eden through rewriting of the evolutionary story, yet their careful cultivation also reveals, through their purging of “savage” elements, the racism central to this narrative of civilized progress. In portraying Herland’s women as thoughtful scientists, the novel inserts women into the evolutionist story’s mastery of nature. Gilman’s alignment of women with scientific mastery, however, reflects the larger issue of how feminist inscription of evolution slipped into dominant evolutionist narratives of race. This slippage is evident in Gilman’s portrayal of gender, too—while she makes a case for women’s equality with men, this case is made through desexualization and instrumentalization. By countering the sexist implications in Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, Gilman deprives the women of sexual expression, unintentionally confirming Victorian ideas of women’s sexuality. After they marry the men, the Herlanders lack interest in sexual pleasure, viewing intercourse as necessary only for procreation (Gilman 126), and there is no hint of same-sex pleasure among the women. The text places the responsibility for male arousal on women; Van is satisfied with the lack of sex because “these women were not provocative. That made an immense difference” (Gilman 128). When one woman, Alima, does express some sexual interest, Van remarks, “I think she had a far-descended atavistic trace of more marked femaleness” (Gilman 130). By describing female sexuality as “atavistic,” Gilman circumscribes it as a mark of lesser civilization and a vestige of a less-evolved state. In this way, *Herland*’s portrayal of female sexuality resonates with Gilman’s linkage of heterosexuality and miscegenation, as female sexuality contains the threat of a less-developed past, which is of course, as I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, racialized.

Similar to this oddly conservative presentation of sexuality, the text’s exhortation of maternity as the supreme task of womanhood unintentionally reflects the Victorian cult of domesticity and affirms the patriarchal view of women as instruments of maternity. Regarding Gilman’s stance toward maternity in this novel, Thomas Galt Peyser claims, “for the Herlanders, motherhood is clearly the fulfillment of their being…and the culminating instance of all the highest aspirations of civilization” (14). In addition, Seitler observes of these tendencies in Gilman’s work, “If a contemporary model of feminism typically positions itself against scientific renderings of identity, here, reforming masculinist structures like the family means embracing motherhood as a site of biological value,” which also “means corroborating the racialist impulses of national-patriarchal discourses” (189). In other words, the attempts of Gilman and other feminists to employ science—as I focus on here, evolution—to advance a feminist reimagining of society gave way to affirmation of biological determination of the feminine body. However, while Seitler highlights Gilman’s engagement in racist eugenics, I want to emphasize that Gilman’s instrumentalization of the maternal body cannot be separated from the evolutionist understanding of race as a function of descent.

While Gilman’s feminism and racism at first seem at odds, or simply a product of their time, the reliance in *Herland* on a narrative of evolutionary progress through purified descent reveals how the argument for women’s maternal participation in civilization necessarily, perhaps inevitably, turns on racist hierarchy. This is clear especially when *Herland*’s celebration of motherhood is read alongside Larsen’s portrayal of motherhood as a site of suffering in *Quicksand*. The mother’s body as an instrument of progress only makes sense within a scheme that views human descent as a scale of more or less developed bodies. Indeed, the use of narrative in *Herland* reflects how the evolutionist paradigm orders race and gender through narrative. The history of Herland itself is a linear story of triumphant development. The novel’s ending in Van’s happy marriage to Ellador, moreover, reflects conventional narratives of heterosexual romance, albeit not in the usual sexually climactic manner. *Herland*’s advocacy of biopolitical control of reproduction reveals how the evolutionary paradigm of progress toward white civilization is an artificial overlay on the far more complex, entangled, and unpredictable processes of actual nature. Women’s participation in evolution toward civilization is made possible through a utopian narrative of cultivated maternity.

## Grounded Descent: Race, Sexuality, and Maternity in Short Stories by Kate Chopin

Kate Chopin’s short fiction offers intriguing approaches to race, reproduction, sexuality, and descent when considered alongside Gilman’s and Larsen’s diverging engagements with these issues. While twentieth-century feminism’s recovery of Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* has positioned her as a pioneer in feminist themes, her short stories present less easily delineated consideration of racial issues, the difficulty of which sheds different light on her feminism. Chopin’s regional and social positioning certainly shaped her attitudes toward race—her husband, Oscar Chopin, was a Louisiana slaveholder and member of a local white supremacist organization (Toth 92, 133-34), and Kate experienced the postbellum South’s reckoning with the new social order (Armiento 47-48). Indeed, Chopin’s short fiction has most frequently been read in terms of regionalism; when Chopin’s stories were published, they were advertised as “local color,” a label which circumscribed them as exotic accounts of regional specificities for the entertainment of its city-dwelling readers. While scholars have questioned this “local color” designation and the ways it delimits Chopin’s literary contributions, the Louisiana setting and its racial hierarchy is undeniably a crucial element in these short stories.[[41]](#footnote-41) For my purposes, the Louisianan emphasis on different castes of racial classification—not only black and white, but also mulatto, octoroon, quadroon, Creole, Cajun—reveals how the visibility of race, situated within lines of descent, exerts powerful regulation of American concepts of racial and gender identity and overlaps with class, region, and culture. The aftermath of the Civil War in the South, especially, resulted in the heightened focus on biology as a measure of hierarchy, as I noted in my Introduction. This racial upheaval coincided with the scientific and popular dissemination of evolutionist demarcations of the human body.

These trends coalesce in Chopin’s fiction. Her documented interest in Darwin and evolutionary theory attests to her consciousness of how the evolutionist paradigm reshaped concepts of the body and material processes. Moreover, Chopin’s focus on how these issues affected women’s lives, particularly sexuality and maternity, further sheds light on the entanglement of race and gender in the biological organization of the body. Chopin’s stance is distinct from Gilman and Larsen. While she shared Gilman’s concern for women’s liberation from Victorian domesticity, Chopin was not a member of feminist groups (Toth 182). This independent streak is perhaps shared by Larsen. However, while Larsen reveals the damage of biopolitical determinations for racialized women, Chopin’s texts show how white women participated in this inscription. Chopin does not advance eugenic racism in the manner of Gilman, but in relating stories of Louisiana life, she shows (intentionally or not) how imperatives of maternity and sexuality had very different effects on white and black bodies.

Several scholars—in biography, archival research, and literary criticism—have noted Chopin’s interest in Darwin and evolution, and moreover, established this interest as an important influence on her literary work. Biographer Emily Toth describes Chopin in the 1880s as a “voracious reader with a growing interest in biology and anthropology” (152). According to Toth, a letter of one of Chopin’s contemporaries shows that “she kept the works of Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer as [in the words of Chopin’s friend] ‘her daily companions’” (152). Chopin’s reading of Darwin and other evolutionists is also supported by Per Seyersted’s critical biography (84-85).[[42]](#footnote-42) David Z. Wehner situates Chopin’s scientific reading in relation to her Catholic upbringing and argues, “Chopin’s unorthodox views on female sexuality, marriage, and motherhood grew out of her unorthodox views on religion and her attempt to reconcile the Catholicism of her early life with her later reading in writers like Charles Darwin” (155). Wehner’s connection between Chopin’s “unorthodox views” expressed in her fiction and those of evolutionary theory is echoed by a handful of literary critics, who have analyzed Chopin’s fiction, primarily *The Awakening*, in light of her interest in Darwin. Bender explores how Chopin’s reading influenced her depictions of courtship, marriage, and female sexuality. For instance, Bender claims that details in *The Awakening* show that “Long having accepted the theories of natural and sexual selection, in general, Chopin now argued mainly that the female plays a far more active and passionate role in the ‘sexual struggle’ than Darwin had suggested” (198). John Glendening also focuses on evolutionary themes in *The Awakening*, claiming that this “help[s] explain Edna Pontellier’s behavior and its natural and cultural antecedents” (41).

These critics have thus shown how Chopin’s fiction responded to evolutionist discourse’s effects on late nineteenth century reconsiderations of human embodiment and sexuality. I extend this insight beyond *The Awakening*, as focusing on Chopin’s short fiction enables greater understanding of the relay between race and gender in her work. These racialized and gendered categories are constituted via descent and reproduction, echoing my analyses of Larsen and Gilman. As stated, place is important in Chopin’s work, not only in terms of the South’s social world, but also in terms of her attention to its natural terrain. Questions over whether Chopin can be considered a “naturalist” have arisen occasionally in the scholarship on her work,[[43]](#footnote-43) and recently, the significance of the environment in her fiction has been examined through the lens of ecocriticism. For instance, Jessica Bridget George argues of Chopin’s works that “a careful bioregional reading…requires us to think ecologically” and to “reconceive of place and time” (44). For the purpose of my analysis, I do not aim to delve into whether texts should be classified as “naturalist,” nor to venture into ecocritical theory. However, attention to potential naturalistic determinism and to the environment’s role clearly intersect with the underlying presence of evolutionist theory in Chopin’s work. Wehner claims that Chopin’s texts echo Darwin’s sense of the “scientific sublime” (160)—in other words, his attitude of wonder toward the natural world and its entangled processes. I argue that this attitude is evident, for example, at the *Origin*’s end. Darwin says of natural selection, “There is grandeur in this view of life…while this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed laws of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved” (*OS* 174). Darwin expresses his wonder by adopting a vast, non-anthropocentric perspective. I trace a similar perspective of wonder in Chopin’s sketch “The Night Came Slowly”: “The night came slowly, softly, as I lay out there under the maple tree…And the outlines of trees and foliage nearby blended in one black mass…Human shapes flitted by like intangible things” (Chopin 772). This attention to natural detail and description of humans as “intangible shapes” suggests a view of humans as embedded in nature, rather than masters of it. As George observes, above, attention to the environment can enable us to “reconceive of place and time,” and so Chopin’s attention to the coexistence of humans and the natural world bears upon her narrative construction and hence reverberates with evolutionary theory’s narrative temporality. Indeed, the entanglement between humans and their natural surroundings, and the wildness of those surroundings, are recurrent motifs in Chopin’s work. This attitude toward nature is markedly distinct from Gilman’s ideology of cultivation, and accordingly, also suggests a different stance toward the feminine body’s racialized role in sexuality and maternity. Situating Chopin’s work as influenced by evolutionary theory helps us to further understand how her narratives position racialized and gendered bodies within temporal nature.

Chopin’s short story “The Bênitous’ Slave” clearly exhibits how the concept of descent forms the backbone of late nineteenth century racial hierarchy. In this very short tale, published in *Bayou Folk* (1894), the narrator recounts the freedman Old Uncle Oswald’s search for the descendants of his former masters. At the story’s beginning, the reader learns, “Old Uncle Oswald believed he belonged to the Bênitous, and there was no getting the notion out of his head. Monsieur tried every way, for there was no sense in it. Why, it must have been fifty years since the Bênitous owned him. He had belonged to others since, and had later been freed. Besides, there was not a Bênitou left in the parish now” (Chopin 240). This information establishes the hierarchical master-slave relationship as an ontological certainty, a fact that cannot be undone by briefer relationships or even by the major shift of emancipation. The narrator links this relationship to kinship by identifying the Bênitous not in terms of a single person, but rather as a group, and furthermore, by noting “there was not a Bênitou left in the parish now.” This language signals that their mastery over Oswald does not depend on a particular leader, but rather on the family’s essential claim of ownership, which is passed on to their descendants; it is clearly implied that if a Bênitou did in fact remain in the parish, their claim to Oswald’s service would still exist due to their lineage.

Significantly, the story locates this claim of essential mastery in Oswald’s desires. In an early essay on Chopin published in 1971, Richard H. Potter claims that this story “probes the psychological implications of slavery” (48). Potter argues that, rather than “view[ing] Uncle Oswald as merely the embodiment of the good Negro,” we can interpret that Oswald’s “entire self-concept has been…warped by his slave past” and he suffers “a kind of insanity” (48). While Oswald can certainly be viewed as suffering psychological distress, the story’s point of view and its resolution suggest, whether intentionally or not, that Oswald’s yearning reflects Southern white nostalgia for a more stable hierarchy. One could argue that the white characters’ bemusement at Oswald’s irrationality is evidence for Potter’s claims; however, Oswald’s participation in this nostalgia cements its certainty, as it is felt even by non-whites. This is further supported by the text’s concern with the Bênitous’ descendants. By projecting white nostalgia for the antebellum South on to a black freedman, the text supports the ideology of essential hierarchy, as even Oswald recognizes the Bênitous’ birthright to mastery.

Interestingly, though, the portrayal of Oswald as irrational, even childlike, threatens to undercut this logic of essential hierarchy even as it supports it. In the above quotation, the narrator notes that “there was no sense to” Oswald’s beliefs about the Bênitous. This image of Oswald as ignorant and senseless is further established when the narrator relates, “he was always running away from Monsieur—who kept him out of pure kindness—and trying to get back to those Bênitous. More than that, he was constantly getting injured in such attempts” (Chopin 240). In portraying Monsieur’s beneficence in response to Oswald’s irrationality, the text positions the white and black men in a biologically-determined scale. Oswald’s wishes are so irrational that he injures himself, while Monsieur adopts a patronizing attitude, wherein he “keeps” Oswald as a means of protecting him from his senseless impulses. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the evolutionist paradigm positions whiteness as a mark of developed rationality and blackness as a mark of less-developed irrationality. In this scheme, blackness is a visible sign of belonging to a line of descent closer to animals, or to put it another way, of occupying a more childlike stage of humanity. Chopin’s text situates Oswald and Monsieur along these lines: Oswald is like a child or pet that doesn’t know any better. Moreover, the fact that, although he has aged, Oswald remains stuck in the past, while the Bênitous have progressed into the future by bearing more kin, invokes the view of blackness as primitive embodiment, unable to develop past childhood or to progress into the future.

The story concludes with Oswald encountering, by chance, the child Susanne Bênitou, a descendant of his old masters, who picks up his cane “as any nice child would have done” (Chopin 241). Oswald obediently follows Susanne, and subsequently, Monsieur “prevailed upon Madame Bênitou to accept the gratuitous services of Uncle Oswald for the sake of the old darky’s safety and happiness” (Chopin 241). The narrator relates, “Uncle Oswald never tries to run away now. He chops wood and hauls water. He cheerfully and faithfully bears the parcels that Susanne used to carry; and makes an excellent cup of black coffee” (Chopin 241). Oswald’s reunion with the Bênitous thus constitutes a happy resolution, as his service to the family’s descendants restores the hierarchy to which their bloodline is entitled. Descent structures not only the hierarchy of rational whiteness and senseless blackness, but also this hierarchy’s future perpetuation via the ongoing bloodline. Yet, while the projection of white nostalgia on to Oswald permits the text to present the white characters as charitably accommodating him rather than enforcing servitude upon him, Oswald’s irrationality itself hints at the fragility of this logic. By placing the desire for stable hierarchy on the text’s most irrational character and presenting the white characters as skeptical of this desire, the story hints that the white-black relationship is not necessarily essential, but rather, perhaps, a fiction. However, the white characters’ privilege allows them their skepticism, while the black character’s irrationality both proves his inferiority and enables his “cheerful” and “faithful” contentment with servitude.

Descent is the underlying groundwork for the white-black hierarchy in “The Bênitous’ Slave,” yet gender and sexuality do not play significant roles. Whether Oswald, a man, has borne children is unknown and apparently inconsequential. However, in “La Belle Zoraïde,” also published in *Bayou Folk*, Chopin’s female heroine is caught in a matrix of racial classification, sexuality, and maternity that constrains her desire and future. This story’s themes echo Chopin’s more well-known story “Désirée’s Baby,” which has received more scholarly attention.[[44]](#footnote-44) In this chapter, I focus on “La Belle Zoraïde” as an intriguing approach to themes of race, sexuality, and maternity; by giving attention to this lesser-known work, I highlight it as a significant text, both on its own and as an illumination of similar themes in Chopin’s other works. The attitude of Chopin herself toward her racialized subjects is unclear, and unlike Gilman, cannot be supported by nonfiction writings. Notwithstanding Chopin’s personal feelings, “La Belle Zoraïde,” like “Désirée’s Baby,” offers an ambivalent depiction of the Louisianan racial hierarchy. While Uncle Oswald finds his place within this hierarchy, Zoraïde and Désirée can find no comfort. While they may be categorized as embodying the “tragic mulatta” stereotype in a far more simplistic way than Larsen’s Helga Crane, Chopin’s characters’ unease with their society’s dictates of sexuality and maternity echo Edna Pontellier’s difficulties with Victorian white womanhood. Dagmar Pegues claims, “In both ‘Désirée’s Baby’ and ‘La Belle Zoraïde,’ we can detect not only violence and neglect directed toward the black body but also a unanimous refusal of the possibility of a functional bi-racial family” (16). Both stories center on mixed-race characters whose acceptability in racial hierarchy hinges on their refusal of personally fulfilling sexuality and maternity; this refusal is necessary to uphold the fiction of the races as discrete lines of descent. Zoraïde and Désirée’s stories therefore anticipate, from an angle of whiteness, Helga Crane’s thwarted sexuality and unhappy maternity in *Quicksand*. In fact, the women’s racial positioning between black and white sets them apart from Uncle Oswald and other decidedly black characters in Chopin’s fiction, therefore suggesting that their unhappy ends are the result of both their sexualized womanhood and their uncertain positions in racial hierarchy. These latent anxieties are exploded by the women’s maternity. “La Belle Zoraïde” shows how racial hierarchy is constituted in terms of sexuality and reproduction.

The title character of “La Belle Zoraïde” is a mulatta slave who is treasured for her beauty by her white mistress. Her story is told by the black servant woman Manna Loulou to her own white mistress. Manna Loulou describes Zoraïde: “her soft, smooth skin was the color of *café-au-lait*. As for her elegant manners, her *svelte* and graceful figure, they were the envy of half the ladies who visited her mistress, Madame Delariviére” (Chopin 313). Zoraïde is established as a sensuous figure who, by virtue of her beauty and light-colored skin, is able to adhere to hegemonic beauty standards of “elegance” and “grace.” Indeed, the fact that Zoraïde has “her own little black servant” distinguishes her as not exactly black (Chopin 313), and this distinction accounts for her ability to embody tasteful attractiveness. However, the comparison of her skin to “café-au-lait,” in addition to establishing her mulatta status, emphasizes her desirability through linking her surface appearance to a pleasurable drink for consumption, thereby rendering her an exotic object. While Zoraïde’s beauty is such that it inspires white women’s envy, it is nonetheless contained as exotic and distinctly other from whiteness. This is demonstrated by Zoraïde’s mistress, who simultaneously esteems her as a reflection of tasteful beauty and compels clear boundaries around her racial position. Madame Delariviére tells her, “when you are ready to marry, it must be in a way to do honor to your bringing up” and encourages her to marry the mulatto “body servant” of a local doctor (Chopin 313).

When Zoraïde resists the propriety of this match, and instead falls in love with Mézor, a dark-skinned black man, her future is imperiled. The story introduces Zoraïde’s attraction to Mézor as irresistible: “The truth of the matter was, Zoraïde had seen le beau Mézor dance the Bamboula in Congo Square. That was a sight to hold one rooted to the ground. Mézor was as straight as a cypress-tree and as proud looking as a king. His body, bare to the waist, was like a column of ebony and it glistened like oil” (Chopin 313). The narrator clearly establishes Zoraïde’s sexual feelings for Mézor by establishing him as dancing the Bamboula, a traditional African dance to a drum (Pegues 14) and describing his body in frankly erotic terms. Chopin’s description of Zoraïde’s attraction to Mézor both engages in stereotypes of blackness and positively affirms black sensuality. Like Zoraïde, Mézor’s physical beauty is exoticized, but to a greater extent due to his dark skin’s positioning him as clearly other from whiteness. The text’s imagery emphasizes the sexuality of Mézor’s dance, as Pegues notes, “the incorporation of the phallic symbols of a cypress tree and a column of ebony allow us to interpret Chopin’s depiction of the black male body in ‘La Belle Zoraïde’ as deeply eroticized” (14). Indeed, the text’s eroticism is further emphasized by the attention to Mézor’s body “glisten[ing] like oil,” leaving no doubt about Zoraïde’s attraction. While it may be claimed that this description traffics in stereotypes of black men as hypersexual, Pegues argues that “Chopin offers sexualized images of the black male body without including any explicit references to bestiality or savagery” and so “abandon[s] the conventional treatment of black male sexuality as savage or brutal” (14). I agree with these claims, as the text’s description of Mézor as “proud looking as a king” and its reference to “ebony” evoke a view of sexuality not as abject, but rather as alluringly dignified.

However, the role of point of view is important to note here. The text establishes Mézor’s sexual attractiveness as the assessment of Zoraïde herself, which is also filtered through Manna Loulou, the black woman narrating the tale. Pegues claims that Chopin “captures…interracial desire” through Zoraïde’s attraction to Mézor (14). Yet, while Zoraïde’s mistress indeed views this desire as crossing racial boundaries, it is nonetheless contained outside whiteness. In other words, Chopin is able to depict eroticized black sexuality because she presents it through the lenses of the nonwhite Zoraïde and Manna Loulou, thereby avoiding any suggestion of white-black sexual romance and distancing Mézor from her own authorial gaze. The story thus wavers between honoring black sexuality and circumscribing it within a sphere of nonwhite descent. In this way, Zoraïde’s attraction to Mézor is both dignified and, as the result of their common black lineage, essentialized. Considering Mézor’s dance alongside Helga’s anxiety at the Harlem jazz club in *Quicksand* is also revealing: Chopin can romanticize Mézor’s dance from her distance as a white writer, and moreover, the fact that it is a man dancing, rather than a woman, eliminates the possibility of stereotypes of black woman’s sensuality as degrading.

Yet, while the text retains Zoraïde’s grace by depicting her as an observer of sensual dance, rather than as a participant, its openness about Zoraïde’s sexual desire delineates this story as part of Chopin’s larger thematic concern with affirming women as sexual beings. Unlike Gilman’s view of female sexuality as a hindrance to be denied, Chopin depicts sexuality as an element that women share with men and as linked to the natural world at large. Nature imagery is significant in Chopin’s portrayal of Mézor. He is “straight as a cypress-tree,” and moreover, Manna Loulou describes his dance as “a sight to hold one rooted to the ground.” By comparing Zoraïde’s desire to being held “rooted to the ground,” the text positions it as deeply embedded in nature, suggesting that this desire both grows from nature and unites Zoraïde with it. Chopin’s depiction of sexuality can be viewed as a response to Darwinian evolution. She presents women as active desirers in the sexual exchange—in fact, the story’s attention to male dance and music echoes Darwin’s elaboration of birds’ courtship rituals.[[45]](#footnote-45) In addition, the embeddedness of this sexuality in nature reflects Darwin’s wonder at the interlinking of organisms and processes.

However, the fact that Chopin locates this natural eroticism in nonwhite bodies implies the dominant evolutionist paradigm, which I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, of blackness as less-developed. In fact, this is explicitly shown when Loulou says, “You know how the negroes are…There is no mistress, no master, no king nor priest who can hinder them from loving when they will. And these two found ways and means” (Chopin 314). The irresistible force of Zoraïde and Mézor’s mutual desire, then, is troublingly racially coded, as their urgent will to overcome all obstacles to togetherness is typical of “how the negroes are.” Chopin gives voice to this racial stereotype through a black woman, enabling the text to assert this claim of uncontrollable black sexuality as a truism. By portraying these characters as more in touch with their natural sexuality, the text supports the evolutionist imagining of black heritage embodying innate animality. Moreover, the story’s delineation of this attraction outside whiteness allows Chopin to safely write about sexuality, even as the text critiques Southern boundary lines of racialized sexuality. As Michele Birnbaum argues of *The Awakening*, “Edna locates in racial and ethnic Others a territory necessary for a liberating alterity: in their difference, she finds herself” (303).

The response of Zoraïde’s mistress, Madame Delariviére, to her desire to marry Mézor shows how policing of sexuality, and hence the reproductive lines of descent, maintained the Southern racial hierarchy. When Zoraïde shares her desire to marry Mézor, Madame is “at first speechless with rage,” and then exclaims “That negro! That negro!” (Chopin 314). Zoraïde’s response to these exclamations is ambiguous—it asserts the reality of the color line even as it questions it. While Zoraïde has enjoyed the privilege of relative proximity to whiteness, she denies this lineage: “‘Am I white, nénaine?’ pleaded Zoraïde,” and then, “‘I am not white,’ persisted Zoraïde, respectfully and gently…‘Since I am not white, let me have from out of my own race the one whom my heart has chosen’” (Chopin 314). This exchange reveals how racial identity, in the American racial hierarchy, shifts with context but, when its boundaries are threatened, ultimately relies on essential divisions. Though Chopin uses the word “pleaded,” the tone of Zoraïde’s question “Am I white?” is unclear and thus its meaning is ambiguous. The very question is ironic, as Zoraïde’s position and physical features clearly demarcate her as not white, but at the same time, her proximity to whiteness compels her desire to escape it. Therefore, Zoraïde identifies Mézor as “of my own race,” despite her mulatta status, because she knows that her visible lineage of blackness excludes her from the purifying imperatives of whiteness.

Moreover, while the liminality of her mulatta status might seem to grant Zoraïde greater movement between the white and black realms, Madame Delariviére’s reaction shows that mulatta-ness in fact constitutes another group in the hierarchical scale. Zoraïde’s rejection of whiteness is presented as granting her the freedom to choose her lover. However, the taxonomy of Zoraïde’s society forbids this: Zoraïde is allowed to only marry someone of her own specific group—a fellow mulatto. Any deviation from this path threatens carefully maintained hierarchy. Even as Zoraïde embodies the crossing of racial boundaries, her liminal status is reimagined as a distinct group and stabilized as a line of descent between black and white. The mulatto’s disruption of the black-white color line, in other words, is contained within its own boundaries. Therefore, Zoraïde’s questioning “Am I white?” together with her insistence that she marry one “of my own race” exposes the tension underlying this racial hierarchy. If Zoraïde’s protests draw attention to the one-drop rule, then her forbidden union with Mézor shows that, perhaps paradoxically, the visible fluctuations of American racial constitution necessitate the constant stabilization of discrete scales of lineage. Pegues notes, “In the case of Désirée and Zoraïde, the mulatta characters are not seen as a threat *per se*; it is rather their potential ability to ‘pass’ as white that constitutes a major threat and needs to be identified as a failure” (17) and “Their hybridity is not portrayed as a potentially liberating situation foreshadowing the national unification but, in fact, as a threat to the local hierarchy” (18). Zoraïde and Mézor could suggest the possibility of the “higher” light-skinned woman joining with the “lower” dark-skinned man as acceptable, which therefore needs to be forbidden by this hierarchy.

Zoraïde’s enjoyment of forbidden sexuality with Mézor results in Madame Delariviére convincing Mézor’s master Doctor Langlé to eliminate him from their area. Doctor Langlé, due to his own attraction to Madame, fulfills her request and “sold away [Mézor] into Georgia, or the Carolinas, or one of those distant countries” (Chopin 315). As a white woman, Madame employs her sexuality to prevail upon others to facilitate her policing of a woman of color’s sexuality. Intentionally or not, this scenario neatly encapsulates the diverging consequences of sexuality for white and nonwhite women—an instrument of passivity on the one hand, and an active desire in need of containment on the other. In the racialized scheme that Chopin establishes, Zoraïde’s sensuality leads to her tragic separation from her lover, and moreover, to pregnancy. The narrator relates that Zoraïde was “heartbroken” about Mézor, “but she took comfort and hope in the thought of her baby that she would soon be able to clasp to her breast” (Chopin 315). However, to compel Zoraïde to forget Mézor, Madame tells Zoraïde the “wicked falsehood” that the baby is dead and sends the child to her faraway plantation (Chopin 315). Like Helga, Zoraïde cannot enjoy sexuality apart from maternity or in the context of conventional romance, and her maternity leads to sorrow rather than joy. For these racialized women, reproduction constitutes the sacrifice of sexual enjoyment and the instrument of perpetuating racial oppression.

However, unlike Helga, Zoraïde is attached to her child due to the link she provides to her vanished lover—and so, when she loses the child as well, she slides into emotional devastation. Zoraïde begins to believe that “a senseless bundle of rags shaped like an infant in swaddling clothes” is her child (Chopin 316). In describing Zoraïde’s treatment of these rags as an infant, the narrator claims, “Zoraïde was demented” (Chopin 316). Given this state, Madame consults with Doctor Langlé, and they agree to return her “real baby of flesh and blood” to Zoraïde in order to restore her sanity (Chopin 316). However,

Zoraïde looked with sullen suspicion upon her mistress and the child before her. Reaching out a hand she thrust the little one mistrustfully away from her. With the other hand she clasped the rag bundle fiercely to her breast; for she suspected a plot to deprive her of it. Nor could she ever be induced to let her own child approach her; and finally the little one was sent back to the plantation, where she was never to know the love of mother or father. (Chopin 316-17)

The tragedy of “La Belle Zoraïde,” then, is not only that the Southern hierarchy forbids Zoraïde’s union with her chosen lover, but also that her bond with her child is irreparably damaged by white policing of her sexuality and reproduction. Like Helga, Zoraïde is unable to enjoy the unencumbered maternal devotion that is both the privilege and the weight of white women. Maternity transforms from a natural bond of organic life to an artificial farce of inanimate material; by portraying Zoraïde’s maternal devotion as self-deceiving and illogical, then, the text questions the ideological naturalization of maternal caregiving.

Moreover, the fact that Zoraïde becomes “demented” and cannot let go of her irrational attachment to the rag bundle suggests how notions of rationality work to delimit racial and gender hierarchy. As I have shown in my analysis of Darwinian discourse, the Enlightenment concept of rationality functions as a measure of evolutionary progress, a view endorsed by Gilman. In this way, progress and rationality are configured as the natural province of white masculinity. At first glance, Zoraïde’s degeneration into irrationality appears to confirm this logic—interestingly, it is comparable to the degenerated narrator of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Chopin’s story presents emotion and maternal instinct as dangerous, all-consuming states, thus implicitly reflecting the Western conception of rational knowledge as a product of controlled dispassion. The causes of Zoraïde’s madness point to her condition not as innate, but rather as the result of the sociopolitical forces of white supremacy, slavery, and the color line. Indeed, the contrast between the elegant Zoraïde at the start of the story and the demented Zoraïde at the end emphasizes that her irrationality is not innate and that, perhaps, the story’s tragedy arises from the power of the forces upon Zoraïde and Mézor.

However, the story’s final result is also presented as irreversible—even the return of her living child cannot reanimate their bond or occasion Zoraïde’s ascent from madness. Manna Loulou concludes, “And now this is the end of Zoraïde’s story. She was never known again as la belle Zoraïde, but ever after as Zoraïde la folle, whom no one ever wanted to marry…She lived to be an old woman, whom some people pitied and others laughed at” (Chopin 317). The narrator’s closing creates an air of resignation around the tale. Zoraïde becomes a passive victim of her mistress’s maneuvering to preserve racial hierarchy, experiences maternal love as superficial mimicry, and is passively shattered by the forces of hierarchy and emotion. Therefore, like the depiction of black sexuality in this story, Chopin’s writing of Zoraïde’s end teems with ambiguity. Manna Loulou and her mistress clearly view the story as a tragedy (Chopin 317), yet the text’s stance on the meaning of this tragedy offers an array of potential interpretations: it is unclear if the text presents Zoraïde’s fate as the inevitable result of her sexual transgression, or as evidence of the injustice of racial hierarchy. My analysis suggests that these very ambiguities are what make this text, and Chopin’s treatment of race, so richly revealing of late nineteenth-century ideas of race, sexuality, and gender as embodied states.

In some ways, Zoraïde’s tragic fate echoes those of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* and Chopin’s other white heroines seeking feminist self-determination, such as Mrs. Mallard in “The Story of an Hour.” These women, too, are swept in a wave of seemingly uncontrollable emotions and instincts toward tragedy. In this respect, Chopin puts a pessimistic feminist twist on the evolutionist idea of instincts or drives as all-determining—it seems that Chopin, given her context, can only imagine drives of sexuality and self-determination as leading women toward death, rather than life.

Yet the key distinction between Zoraïde and these other women is that, however emotionally driven, Edna and Mrs. Mallard’s fates are self-determined. Birnbaum also notes that Edna’s liberation is facilitated by the invisible labor of her servants of color: “as Edna awakens, race is rendered narratively invisible” (305). Zoraïde, on the other hand, is at the mercy of others’ decisions, particularly those of her white mistress. Zoraïde’s story ends in her loss of self to irrationality and her humiliation as an object of scorn; her body lives, but she has lost stable subjectivity and her affective bonds with other humans. Like the ending of *Quicksand*, the story suggests that for oppressed subjects, biological movement forward in time—through the continuation of one’s own life and the reproduction of new racialized lives—is not necessarily a matter of progress. The biologically innate progress of white bodies presumed by Gilman is socially forbidden to oppressed bodies. The regress of Helga and Zoraïde via maternity shows how assumptions of certain groups as embodying undeveloped descent functions as a rationale for their oppression in a circular process. To a wider extent, it also undermines the evolutionist doctrine of progress as a whole. The development of species via evolution does not necessarily mean that organic life progresses in a linear narrative toward rational superiority, especially where it concerns humans and their sociocultural systems. Chopin’s engagement with evolutionary theory thus markedly contrasts with Gilman’s—rather than endorsing the white narrative of progress and its concomitant taming of nature, Chopin’s work shows humans as caught within nature’s processes of life, death, and instinct and suggests that women’s path to self-determination will not run parallel to rational masculine cultivation.

In this chapter, I have analyzed the permeation of evolutionist themes of maternity, race, and sexuality in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* and Kate Chopin’s short fiction. At the beginning of the chapter, I discussed how turn-of-the-century white feminists appropriated evolutionist discourse as a means of advancing their own interests. This appropriation is evident in Gilman’s *Herland*. I showed that in this novel, Gilman articulates an ideology of feminist eugenics, and I highlighted how the novel presents cultivation of material life—human, animal, and plant—as central to the project of Western civilized progress. Meanwhile, I explored the ambiguities of race and descent in select short stories by Chopin, which both support and critique Southern racial hierarchy. I showed that, in contrast to Gilman, Chopin presents humans and sexuality as embedded in nature.

# CODA

In this dissertation, I began with Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, proceeded to his *Descent of Man*, and journeyed forth to tracing these texts’ resonances in turn-of-the-century literary works by Larsen, Gilman, and Chopin. Through this structure and its points of concern, I have highlighted the entanglement of discourses and texts often viewed as discrete, and further drawn attention to how, in the context of transatlantic Western modernity, the corporeal entities configured—biologically and popularly—as “race” and “gender” converge upon each other as both commonly inscribed and uneasily asymmetrical. My close textual reading of evolutionist discourse and of American literary works has concentrated on particular themes and narrative forms echoing through these texts: developmental progress, the past and the future, kinship and heredity, categorization, material nature and rational culture, maternity, and, perhaps most importantly, descent.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I drew attention to how Darwin, Huxley, and subsequent scientists and anthropologists negotiated the tension between evolutionary theory’s suggestions of mutability and its categorical tendencies through suggesting and delineating evolution’s temporal framework as a hierarchy of stable human difference. I highlighted descent as a central concept stabilizing this framework. In this evolutionist paradigm, the potential chaos of descent is organized into distinct branches, some overhanging others, each bearing differently racialized fruit propagated by the instrumental seeds of maternity. I have shown, however, that turn-of-the-century attempts to classify and regulate the human hierarchy of descent are undercut by the delicacy of these branches, as the branches are shaken by the winds of unpredictability and their seemingly distinct leaves intermingle. In Chapters 3 and 4, I traced these branches through Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Gilman’s *Herland*, and select short stories by Chopin, and thereby analyzed how the evolutionist paradigm permeated turn-of-the-century literary works concerned with time, maternity, nature, and descent. By situating these writers within the context of the evolutionist paradigm of descent and placing them into conversation with each other, I open new pathways for, first, a cultural studies approach to considering the reverberations of evolutionary epistemologies of the human in turn-of-the-century literature and culture, and second, for a literary studies approach to exploring how these women writers’ preoccupations with these themes have potent consequences for understanding the interplay between racial and gender ideologies and their narrative formations.

Indeed, in establishing the evolutionist paradigm as the crucial background for my analysis of American literature, my dissertation suggests how dominant ideologies of racial and gender hierarchy that are glossed with the veneer of scientific validity help to maintain stratified hierarchy against potential realignments of racial and gender relations. While my analyses of Larsen’s, Gilman’s, and Chopin’s works place each within its particular historical and geographical context, my overall focus on their engagements with biologically-determined visions of race and gender resonates deeply with our current American situation. Racial justice issues, vilification of nonwhite immigrants, and attempted government control of women’s reproduction have gained renewed currency in the last several years, and appear to continue as sites of tension; moreover, the questions of humanity’s relation with nature to which I refer in Chapter 4 are particularly evocative in light of the growing dangers of human-caused climate change. In my dissertation, I have discussed narrative structure as a key implement of the dominant evolutionist paradigm of teleological progress toward enlightened human civilization, and further paid attention to how narrative structure contributes to the meaning of Larsen’s, Gilman’s, and Chopin’s works. This concern with how traditional narrative tends to inscribe developmental progress is suggestive in considering the broader significance of my analysis: the reverberations between the sociocultural issues in the turn-of-the-century works on which I focus and the issues in our current context indicate that the American narrative of progress toward unity has not developed in a straight line, but rather circles and stutters as equity and justice collide with entrenched hierarchy. As I have shown, analyzing *Quicksand*, *Herland*, and Chopin’s short stories in light of the evolutionist paradigm of descent yields deeper understanding of the significance, and implications, of these literary narratives. Therefore, I have provided a potential framework for further analysis of race, gender, and nature in other turn-of-the-century American literary and cultural texts, which can thereby enable further understanding of these issues’ reverberations in our present; likewise, literature and culture from the early twentieth century to the present may also be read in light of this framework.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I showed how the background of evolutionist discourse provides crucial context for analyzing Larsen’s, Gilman’s, and Chopin’s works. Placing these writers alongside each other, moreover, illuminates not only how evolutionist thought permeated turn-of-the-century literature, but also how these writers each approached the effects of racialized and gendered ideologies upon women. The echoes and distinctions among Larsen’s, Gilman’s, and Chopin’s approaches to these issues arise from these writers’ affinities and divergences. Each writer offers a singular vision in the form and content of her work, even as they can be tentatively grouped together as advancing (broadly defined) feminist views due to their concerns with how dominant sociocultural structures and ideologies delimit women’s subjectivity and freedom. In literary criticism and conventional understandings of literary history, Gilman and Chopin are often grouped together as early or proto-feminist writers, especially in terms of their best-known works, “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Awakening*, respectively. Meanwhile, Chopin and Larsen have also been compared in light of how their novels’ tragic endings—Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing*—suggest the psychological and material harms of women’s subjugation.

However, race and region also separate these writers, and putting the three together illuminates the fraught relations between racial and gender identities in turn-of-the-century American literature and culture. In *Quicksand*, Helga’s encounters with racialized assumptions and stereotypes in the American north and south, as well as in Denmark, uncover the various forms in which racial hierarchy based upon visible descent takes shape. Chopin’s stories engage with the tensions and cruelty of late nineteenth century Southern racial hierarchy, presenting these tensions both ambiguously and critically. Gilman, meanwhile, creates an imaginary locale in *Herland* in order to advocate a matriarchal and matrilineal civilization that is emphatically white. Larsen and Chopin explore the racial tensions in their characters’ settings. On the other hand, Gilman’s imaginary nation constitutes a land free of patriarchy, but also disturbingly cleansed of racial diversity. These writers’ differing approaches to the links between maternity and race further demonstrate how race and gender are uneasily reconciled across their works. In *Herland*, maternity is unequivocally celebrated as a means for women’s collective structuring of society. In Chapter 4, I showed how, in addition to the questions of gender essentialism it raises, this celebration of maternity is deeply troubling for its eugenic suggestions of assuring white purity. Gilman’s advocacy of maternity as a means for advancing feminist uplift and exclusionary white civilization is especially disturbing and simplistic in relation to Larsen and Chopin. Larsen depicts the destructive effects of white supremacy upon black women’s maternity and Chopin portrays—ambiguously and revealingly—how the maintenance of Southern hierarchy excludes the mulatta woman Zoraïde from the joy of maternity. By examining these writers’ different approaches to descent and maternity, therefore, I show how race is an intrinsic element in modern Western gendered structures of reproduction and maternity. Indeed, placing Larsen, Gilman, and Chopin into conversation helps to emphasize that literary analysis that attends to feminist concerns must necessarily take race, and other facets of identity, into serious account. This dissertation therefore shows that feminist approaches to literary criticism are enriched by intersectional frameworks. This is especially important for writers such as Gilman and Chopin, as I discussed in Chapter 4—their racial identities are often obscured or forgotten when they are praised as feminist writers, and in making these identities visible, I illuminate revealing, sometimes deeply troubling, aspects of their work.

Close reading has been a key method in this dissertation. Through close reading and its deep attention to details and embedded meaning, I discerned and analyzed important suggestions, images, and themes in works by Darwin, Huxley, Larsen, Gilman, and Chopin. This method’s importance to my argument demonstrates how close reading can function as a productive tool for cultural analysis. Indeed, applying this method to scientific discourse—and analyzing the permeations of this analysis in literary works—shows that the humanities’ perspectives and approaches contribute vital methods for scrutinizing discursive formations that may otherwise be accepted at the surface level. Today, as American society and culture assume that science and technology are central to knowledge and economic power, it is important to emphasize that literary criticism and close reading distinctly provide insight into the effects of these trends on human culture and subjectivity. In fact, my analysis of *Quicksand*, *Herland*, and Chopin’s short stories demonstrates how literature itself offers particular insights into scientific discourse. I hope that this framework—more broadly, placing scientific discourse into conversation with literature, and more specifically, attention to the evolutionist paradigm of descent’s effects on race and gender—provides a means and encouragement for further investigations of these issues in transatlantic literature of this period.

My analysis also raises important questions for further discovery. How do other facets of human hierarchy, such as sexuality and disability, play into my analysis of these literary works? Genetics was a burgeoning field of study in the early twentieth century, and largely affects present-day understandings of race and descent—how can we take this into account? How does narrative structure navigate the unpredictability of evolution? What are the feminist effects and significances of further highlighting evolutionary theory’s suggestions of flux and material interrelations? These are some of the fruitful avenues opened up by my dissertation’s argument. The last question, in particular, suggests that perhaps close reading of evolution can also shake and reconfigure the seemingly stable branches of descent. I have analyzed the permeation of the evolutionist paradigm of descent in literature by American women, and in concluding this argument, I question the tidiness of narrative resolution. The evolutionist paradigm affects our attitudes toward the past and the future of humanity. I hope that future visions of humanity, rather than stiffening into rigid divisions, proliferate into manifold budding possibilities.

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1. Other turn-of-the-century American women writers, including Sarah Orne Jewett and Edith Wharton, are also documented as interested in evolution, and some scholars have examined how their works reflect evolutionary themes. However, I have not addressed them in this study because their works do not directly engage with the issues in which I am interested, namely race, descent, and reproduction, to the same extent as the writers I consider. On Jewett and evolution, see, for example, Stacy Alaimo’s *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (2000). On Wharton and evolution, see Jacquelyn Scott’s “The ‘lift of a broken wing’: Darwinian Descent and Selection in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and *Summer*” (2009). For an examination of nineteenth-century American women writers’ engagement with science in general, see Nina Baym’s *American Women of Letters and the Nineteenth-Century Sciences: Styles of Affiliation* (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1899). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993) on the distinction between gender as sociocultural and sex as biological. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For feminist analyses of the parallels between the masculine/feminine and culture/nature binaries, see Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (1987), Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1989), and Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1990). Recently, some feminist theorists have called for complicating this analytical framework; for more information, see Gill Jagger, “The New Materialism and Sexual Difference” (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, Dov Ospovat, *The Development of Darwin’s Theory: Natural History, Natural Theology, and Natural Selection, 1838-1859* (1981) and *The Darwinian Heritage* (1985), edited by David Kohn. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, Stephen G. Alter, *Darwinism and the Linguistic Image: Language, Race, and Natural Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, Ronald L. Numbers, *Darwinism Comes to America* (1998) and Michael Ruse, *The Evolution-Creation Struggle* (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (originally published in 1983); Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*; Amigoni, *Colonies, Cults, and Evolution: Literature, Science, and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Writing* (2007); Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels* (2007); and Richter, *Literature After Darwin: Human Beasts in Western Fiction, 1859-1939* (2011). The journal *Victorian Studies* has also published a special issue, *Darwin and the Evolution of Victorian Studies* (2009), edited by Jonathan Smith. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Darwin in Atlantic Cultures*, edited by Jeanette Eileen Jones and Patrick B. Sharpe (2010); *Charles Darwin’s* The Origin of Species*: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, edited by Amigoni and Jeff Wallace (1995); *The Wider Domain of Evolutionary Thought*, edited by David Oldroyd and Ian Langham (1983); *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880-1940: Essays on Ideological Conflict and Complicity*, edited by Lois A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche (2003); and *Disseminating Darwinism: The Role of Place, Race, Religion, and Gender*, edited by Numbers and John Stenhouse (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See “Mitochondrial Eve and the Affective Politics of Human Ancestry” (2015); “Mutations of Romance: Evolution, Infidelity, and Narrative” (2010); and “Narrative Analysis as a Feminist Method: The Case of Genetic Ancestry Tests” (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Grosz’s *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (2004) and *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In fact, Darwin’s influence on Freud may be a point of interest in this regard. Connections between Darwinian and Freudian thought are examined by Seitler and Weinbaum. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Also see Haraway’s *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989) on how the field of primatology has influenced sociocultural ideologies of race and gender. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Also see Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In addition to the scholars I’ve cited in the Introduction and this chapter, also see, for instance, Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986); Londa Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (originally published 1993); and Emily Martin, “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles” (1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (1987), Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science* (1982), and Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* (1985) for discussions of race scientists, including polygenists and phrenologists. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Richter, McClintock, and Seitler on the racialized fear of atavism. On turn-of-the-century images of race in Western modernist literature, see Urmila Seshagiri, *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Also see Harriet Ritvo, “Classification and Continuity in the *Origin of Species*,” on the nineteenth-century fascination with the missing link and nonhuman primates. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. David Amigoni explores the connection between the concepts of “cultivation” and “culture,” and the role of this connection in colonialism, in *Colonies, Cults, and Evolution*. For more discussion of the cultivation-culture relay, see Chapter 4 of this dissertation. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Russett (93) for further discussion of this particular claim. Russett analyzes the distinction between the Darwinian and Spencerian views and the different implications of each perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I discuss turn-of-the-century feminist appropriations of evolutionary theory in more detail in Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Audre Lorde, for example, critiques white feminists’ history of erasing women of color’s unique perspectives. She describes this erasure as “racial blindness” and “unaddressed privilege” (29). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Doyle, Seitler, Stepan, and Weinbaum. Francis Galton, Darwin’s cousin, introduced the idea of “eugenics” in 1883 (Stepan 111). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See George Hutchinson’s biography, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (2006), for more details on Larsen’s life and background. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. In fact, black critics in the 1920s, most prominently W.E.B. Du Bois, praised *Quicksand* for its portrayal of a bourgeois black women (359-60). Du Bois viewed *Quicksand* as a welcome counterpoint to images of urban primitivism (i.e., black licentiousness and uninhibitedness) in novels such as Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* or Carl van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (McDowell xv; duCille 78-79). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* (1990) and the essay collection *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, edited by Ronald Bush and Elazar Barkan (1995) for explorations of the primitive as a cultural idea in modernism. On primitivism and turn-of-the-century literature, see Gina M. Rossetti, *Imagining the Primitive in Naturalist and Modernist Literature* (2006). See George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (1987), for a critical history of the anthropological idea of the primitive. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Seitler points out that “Freud was influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution” (44), and describes the Freudian idea of the primitive: “the unconscious mind is the space of the past; the past is a primitive beast; we are all just animals” (49). Seitler’s links, presented as self-evident, between the past, primitivism, and animality, demonstrate the permeation of this Darwinian influence. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. According to Doyle, eugenics “gave renewed expression to white racism in the United States. Legislative battles [concerning miscegenation] were largely unnecessary since twenty-eight states already banned marriage between Caucasians and Negroes and the remaining states suffered little threat of ‘miscegenation’ (suppressed by lynching and segregation)” (15). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Angela Onwuachi-Willig, *According to Our Hearts:* Rhinelander v. Rhinelander *and the Law of the Multiracial Family* (2013) and Nadine Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles Against Subjection* (2012) for more information on the Rhinelander case and its consequences for American interracial marriage and racial identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Walker also notes the importance of these contemporary events in contextualizing Larsen’s work. He explains, “Before Larsen wrote her first novel, three highly publicized court cases—all involving mixed-race individuals—had highlighted the nation’s anxiety over race. Beside the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* case (1896), two other cases—*Kirby v. Kirby* (1921) and *Rhinelander v. Rhinelander* (1925)—evinced this anxiety but in relation to miscegenation specifically” and thus these cases were part of “manifold Jim Crow legal epiphenomena fueling Larsen’s imagination” (167). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For detailed analyses of the meaning and function of the mulatta trope in American literature, see Eve Allegra Raimon, *The “Tragic Mulatta” Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction* (2004); Teresa C. Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (2004); and Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For a detailed examination of the influence of eugenics and social Darwinism on this period’s black thought, see Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Wall describes Vayle as “tr[ying] to impress upon Helga her obligation as a member of the Talented Tenth to marry and have children” (99). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Hutchinson discusses the difficult effects of these stereotypes for Larsen’s own parents (20-21). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Elizabeth Schultz notes this strategy in Hughes’ novel *Not Without Laughter*, as she explains (and connects to “Harlem Sweeties” in a footnote), in “using aspects of the natural world to emphasize racial coloration, Hughes not only openly delights in the diversity within the African-American community, but he also undermines the possibility of categorizing blacks monolithically” (1183). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For an examination of a particularly disturbing example of this practice in the United States, in which Ota Benga, an African man, was displayed in the monkey house of the Bronx Zoo in 1906, see Jocelyn L. Bucker, “On the Other: An African on Display in America” (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Hortense J. Spillers also analyzes the pathologization of the black mother within the context of American history—see “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. In addition to the scholars I cite in this chapter, see Stacy Alaimo, “Sexual Matters: Darwinian Feminists and the Nonhuman Turn” (2013) and Wendy Hayden, *Evolutionary Rhetoric: Sex, Science, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Feminism* (2013) for more information, and different perspectives, on late nineteenth-century feminist appropriations of evolutionary discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Gilman’s “A Suggestion on the Negro Problem” (1907) and “Is America Too Hospitable?” (1923). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See, for example, Lane’s Introduction to *Herland*. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. As Dagmar Pegues observes, “The acute visibility of the Other race and its place within the context of local Louisiana epistemology compelled Chopin to construct fictional accounts of characters of the Other race, since the absence of any degree of interrogation of racial issues would seem implausible within the context of the late nineteenth-century Louisiana” (7). On Chopin’s experience with Louisiana’s racial and class hierarchy, also see Marcia Gaudet, “Kate Chopin and the Lore of Cane River’s Creoles of Color” (1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Also see Toth and Seyersted’s commentary in *Kate Chopin’s Private Papers*, in which they note that in the late 1870s she was known to “read new scientific books” (126). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See, for example, Nancy Walker’s “Feminist or Naturalist: The Social Context of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*” (1979), Donald Pizer’s “A Note on Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* as Naturalist Fiction” (2001), and Erik Margraf’s “Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* as a Naturalistic Novel” (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. In addition to Pegues, whose work I cite in this chapter, see Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “Kate Chopin and the Fiction of Limits: ‘Désirée’s Baby’” (1978) and Ellen Peel, “Semiotic Subversion in ‘Désirée’s Baby’” (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Bender analyzes Chopin’s depiction of female sexuality in *The Awakening* in relation to Darwin’s attention to birds’ mating rituals (215-16). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)