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Sex before Gender: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Evolutionary Paradigm of Utopia

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# SEX BEFORE GENDER: CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN AND THE EVOLUTIONARY PARADIGM OF UTOPIA

BERNICE L. HAUSMAN

In a 1989 article published in *Australian Feminist Studies*, Anne Edwards suggests that feminists need to "find new ways of conceptualising sexual difference, that would avoid repeating the logical and philosophical mistakes of previous modes of thought, specifically essentialism, biologism, determinism (of any kind) and dualism." This suggestion comes toward the end of Edwards's discussion of feminist theory's current difficulty in articulating the relationship between the categories "sex" and "gender." At the very end of the article, she presents four options for ameliorating this difficulty: repudiating the "arbitrary demarcation between the social and the non-social . . . [and thereby] treat[ing] sex and gender as a composite entity"; "treat[ing] gender as the central concept"; "privileging sex as the fundamental concept on the grounds that . . . it is important to retain the idea that sexual difference is about bodies and the embodied nature of human experience"; and "devis[ing] new terminology and frameworks for description and analysis which seek to capture the multiple, diverse, changing and often conflicting nature of the representations and experiences through which each human subject is formed."<sup>1</sup>

Of these four options, the second—treating gender as the central concept—is paramount in feminist research in the 1990s and, in conjunction with the fourth option, has significantly widened the scope of feminist inquiry to include intersections of race, class, sexual difference, sexuality, physical ability, nationality, and age. This latter tendency, however, seems to threaten to disperse the specificity of feminism as a concentration on sexual difference. The third option, "privileging sex,"

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# THE FORERUNNER

BY

Charlotte Perkins Gilman.



## CONTENTS

A Small God And A Large Goddess.  
Arrears. Verse.  
Three Thanksgivings.  
Introducing The World, The Flesh,  
And The Devil.  
How Doth The Hat. Verse.

What Diantha Did. Serial. Chap. I.  
Where The Heart Is.  
Our Androcentric Culture, or The  
Man-made World. Chap. I.  
Comment and Review.  
Personal Problems.

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The cover of the first issue of *The Forerunner* which was written and edited by Charlotte Perkins Gilman from 1909 to 1916.

has received little attention but may provide feminist theory with important conceptual tools necessary to address questions concerning the place of the body in feminist theory and differences between the social, natural, and human sciences concerning the origins and meanings of sexual difference. In this sense, "privileging sex" may be a way to achieve the first option, which involves "treat[ing] sex and gender as a composite entity" insofar as any demarcation between the "social" and the "non-social" is understood to be entirely conventional.

In this essay, I argue for privileging "sex" as a primary category of feminist analysis by analyzing one literary context of its usage before "gender" came to signify the social articulation of sexual difference and thereby to dominate the interdisciplinary fields of feminist research.<sup>2</sup> Because "sex" is the old term for what we now sometimes call "gender," it seems logical to review and reconsider what pregender feminists signified when they said and wrote "sex." It is helpful to reorient our analysis historically, because it is too easy to read historical texts according to the categories of the present. Teaching ourselves to read *outside* the sex/gender distinction, and not always *through* it, will help feminist scholars to articulate the meanings of "sex" as an analytic category prior to the historical and semantic split between "sex" and "gender." This is necessary not only to more accurately place feminist discourses in their historical contexts but also to rethink categorical difficulties that arise in our own contemporary theoretical context.

To promote this argument, I will discuss Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novel, *Herland* (originally published serially in 1915 in *The Forerunner*, a journal written and edited by Gilman herself, and finally published in book form in 1979), in relation to her earlier evolutionary treatise entitled *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898). What I will show in the discussion that follows is that *Women and Economics* provides a valuable source for teasing out the meanings of "sex" in Gilman's utopian novel and, therefore, that it is foundational to the social program she promotes in that text. Further, I will suggest that although Gilman's evolutionary feminism does not provide contemporary feminism with a model to emulate, it does offer an alternative view (within current de-

bates) of the body as the locus of biosocial problems for women.

Gilman was not the only feminist thinker who both addressed evolutionary theory's oppressive representation of women and used Darwinian notions of biosocial change to espouse changes in women's roles, duties, and possibilities. For example, a little over twenty years before Gilman published *Women and Economics*, Antoinette Brown Blackwell wrote *The Sexes throughout Nature*. As Marie Tedesco writes: "Blackwell endeavored to prove that evolution produced sexes that were equivalent, that is, different yet equal, in mental and physical traits."<sup>3</sup> Like Gilman, Antoinette Brown Blackwell both incorporated and resisted elements of evolutionary theory, and like Gilman, she reconceptualized Darwinian and Spencerian ideas concerning natural selection, sexual selection, and the division of labor. For example, Blackwell believed that because women were responsible for the "direct nutrition" for their young, in terms of breastfeeding, "*in the scientific distribution of work*, the males, not the females, must be held primarily responsible for the proper *cooking of food*, as for the *production* of it."<sup>4</sup> Antoinette Brown Blackwell's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Blackwell, also participated in revising evolutionary theory, but because she did so within the confines of what she called "Christian physiology," her ideas are weighted down by a tendentious religious morality that Gilman vehemently opposed. Both Antoinette Brown Blackwell and Elizabeth Blackwell presented their revisionary theories of sex in more socially conservative terms than Charlotte Perkins Gilman.<sup>5</sup>

Within the context of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century evolutionary feminism, Antoinette Brown Blackwell's (and others') views are significant and worthy of further study; however, this essay will concentrate almost exclusively on the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, primarily because Gilman's overall theoretical contribution to feminism was so wide-ranging and, perhaps most significantly, because Gilman's fiction is so often taught in the modern university classroom in the United States. In this context, *Herland* often comes to represent contemporary U.S. feminist views and goals.<sup>6</sup> A first step in rehistoricizing *Herland*, especially insofar as it imagines a specifically *feminist* utopian sexual difference, is to link its representations and arguments to others produced by Gilman herself.

It is my hope that this essay will motivate further comparative study of Gilman and other feminist evolutionary theorists of her period.<sup>7</sup>

My analysis offers both a corrective reading of *Herland* and some suggestions for how such a reading can have an impact on the current status of "sex" and "gender" in feminist theorizing. This reinterpretation of Gilman is necessary because contemporary Gilman scholars continue to interpret her work within a sex/gender paradigm. For example, in a recent book, Carol Farley Kessler writes: "Like social scientists today, Gilman carefully differentiated between gender—the social roles, in which she found human gender similarity nearly limitless—and sex, the biological functions, to which she found sex difference limited."<sup>8</sup> Gilman, however, distinguished, *within sex*, those aspects of what she called "sex-distinction" that could and could not be changed, but she did not differentiate between "sex" and "gender" as we know those terms. Instead, she accepted certain necessary distinctions appropriate to sexual reproduction and dismissed others as the "excessive sex-distinctions" that had developed in conjunction with those necessary sex-distinctions.<sup>9</sup> What makes her work difficult for us to accommodate today is precisely the fact that the distinctions occur *within* the category of sex. She did not have a semantic distinction to suggest that certain kinds of sexual difference are "cultural," and thereby changeable, as opposed to those that are "natural" and therefore immutable. What she had instead was an evolutionary paradigm that suggested that all aspects of the human condition—including its biological constitution—were open to change. She dealt with distinctions within one category, which led her to suggest that sex inequity was a result of the "excessive sex-distinction" foisted on women. Thus, she distinguished in terms of degree (that is, quantitatively) within the one category, rather than between qualitative category distinctions (the social *versus* the natural).

Consider, for example, the following, from *Women and Economics*:

The evolution of organic life goes on in geometric progression: cells combine, and form organs; organs combine, and form organisms; organisms combine, and form organizations. Society is an organization. Society is the fourth power of the cell. It is composed of individual animals of genus homo, living in organic relation. The course of social evolution is the grad-



ual establishment of organic relation between individuals, and this organic relation rests on purely economic grounds. In the simplest combination of primordial cells the force that drew and held them together was that of economic necessity. Those that did so survived, and those that did not perished.<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, the idea of the organism as a basic building block of society is not metaphoric. There is no easy nature/culture division here. The social and the biological are connected in the progression from cell to organ to organism to organization.<sup>11</sup>

Gilman defined "sex" in relation to social Darwinism and eugenics.<sup>12</sup> In order to understand what "sex" meant in this context we need to examine the relationship between "nature" and "culture" that emerged in her revision of scientific theories that advocated the "natural" subjugation of women to men and people of color to Caucasians. And this leads us directly to the body as the material link between "nature" and "culture." The problem of the body and how it transmits its "characters" to the next generation was of tremendous importance to Victorian and early-twentieth-century social theorists, both in terms of sexual difference and in terms of racial difference. Differences between bodies presented a problem of appropriate identification: which differences (for instance, racialized differences) indicated a variation within a species, and which indicated the existence of different species altogether?

One way to answer these questions, in the context of evolutionary theory, was to claim that the social is a body, implicated in nature just like the human body. Nineteenth-century evolutionism encouraged an amalgamation of culturalist and scientist arguments concerning "human nature" and social change. In neo-Lamarckian thinking, for example, we can identify a desire to see the physical results of culture on the body, to see the body itself as the carrier and mark of cultural instruction.<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman produced, in both *Women and Economics* and *Herland*, a political response to Darwinian and Spencerian evolutionism that both incorporated and resisted evolutionary arguments concerning sexual difference. Significantly, however, this response espoused racist ideas concerning racial difference and racial subordination. Thus, as we reinterpret her representation of "sex" within the

context of evolutionary theory, we also need to interrogate how Gilman participated in a First Wave feminism that promoted racism as part of its overall program.<sup>14</sup>

In her "breakthrough book" *Women and Economics*, Gilman critically examined the destructive implications of women's economic dependency, claiming for herself the role of sociologist, the one who, "from a biological point of view," will "note its effects on the constitution of the human race, both in the individual and in society" (p. 61). Most significant in this formulation is the idea that the sociologist takes a "biological point of view," which suggests not only Gilman's own position but also the hegemonic position of the principles of biology of the period. This biological paradigm was espoused by sociologist Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth through the work of Lester Frank Ward, Gilman, and others. The idea that the newly developing social sciences were necessarily dependent on the natural sciences, especially biology, was one result of the tremendous impact of Darwinism on Western thought. Evolutionary theory, coupled with a renewed interest in Lamarckian ideas concerning the heritability of acquired characteristics, became popular in American social theory as a way to explain social differences between the races and the sexes as essentially hereditary differences. Social Darwinism, a catchall phrase designating those who relied on evolutionary theory to support their claims about society, became a significant force in reform circles, especially with advocates for eugenics and limited immigration. Not all social Darwinists espoused such racist and conservative policies, however, because the idea of social Darwinism merely rested on the theory that the same set of principles underlies the organization of nature and of society.<sup>15</sup> Ann J. Lane argues that Gilman's social Darwinism, connected as it was to the ideologies of Ward, rested on the "assertion that women, as a collective entity, could, if they so chose, be the moving force in the reorganization of society."<sup>16</sup>

Gilman's reference to the "sociologist" as the appropriate researcher of sex in human culture resonates with the narrative structure of *Herland*. In the novel, three men find evidence of a



fabled "women's land" and decide to explore its interior. Of the three men to infiltrate Herland—Jeff, a doctor and throwback to the days of chivalry; Terry, a rich playboy and amateur explorer; and Van, the rational sociologist—it is Van who narrates the adventure. He says of himself, "As for me, sociology's my major. *You have to back that up with a lot of other sciences, of course. I'm interested in them all*" (p. 2, emphasis added). For Gilman's purposes, Van is the perfect narrator—a "rational" social scientist, he cannot deny the civilized progress of Herland. He represents the sexist beliefs of Darwin and Spencer that Gilman challenged in *Women and Economics*, and being eminently "rational," cannot deny that the astounding evolution of the Herlanders disproves all "scientific" proofs of women's "inately weaker sensibility."

Thus Van, the sociologist who bases his ideas on the sound principles of science, is yet won over by the modest successes of the land of women. His observations, explanations, and interpretations make up the entire text of *Herland*; there is no intervening narrative authority or voice. Thus, although Van is clearly an interested narrator, his narration carries a stamp of scientific validity necessary to prove the kinds of claims Gilman made in the novel. When his ideas are proved fallacious by the stubbornly more scientific and rational ideas of the women of Herland, his failure to substantiate his claims demonstrates the true paucity of a science that is blinded itself by "sex-distinction."<sup>17</sup>

In the book, the "women's land" is cut off from the rest of the world, both geographically and culturally. The men are imprisoned when they prove dangerous to the population of Herland (which is the men's name for the country; we never learn the women's name for it). They are kept captive in the most comfortable surroundings; fed well; taught the language, history, and culture of the country; and finally allowed to live on their own. Eventually, they marry three young Herlanders. Terry, the "man's man" of the three, does not enjoy the scant attention to sexual intimacy favored by the women and attempts to rape his wife. She resists and the elders agree that Terry must be expelled from Herland.

As readers, we learn that Herland is an agricultural heaven (with every aspect of the physical surroundings planned in

order to produce foodstuffs, even the forests), that Herlanders are advocates of animal husbandry and planned breeding (they have bred the wail out of their cats), and that the culture is entirely and absolutely "mother-oriented" (the society itself organized around principles of motherhood and the care of children—to the extent that the idea of providing cow's milk to human children at the expense of calves is conceptually repulsive to Herland women [pp. 47-48]). Herlanders are without most of the characteristics of women in the rest of the world—in Gilman's language we would say that they are without "sex-distinction." Their distinguishing characteristic is a pronounced communal, not familial, maternalism.

Herlanders reproduce parthenogenetically (that is, asexually), and they are responsible for their own livelihoods. Thus, Herlanders do not depend upon men economically *nor* do they need them for procreation. In the Darwinian terms Gilman established in *Women and Economics*, this means that in Herland natural selection continues unimpeded by sexual selection (because there is none of the latter). According to evolutionary theory, sexual selection and natural selection each work as a check on the other. As an example of this, toward the beginning of *Women and Economics* Gilman tells the hypothetical story of the peacock and peahen: if the former were to develop excessive plumage in the interests of attracting the latter as a mate, he would perish due to natural selection because the weight of the feathers would be counterproductive to self-preservation. On the other hand, if the peahen were to become "so small and dull as to fail to keep herself and her young fed and defended, then she would die; and there would be another check to excessive sex-distinction" (p. 35). However,

in her position of economic dependence in the sex-relation, sex-distinction is with [the human female] not only a means of attracting a mate, as with all creatures, but a means of getting her livelihood, as it the case with no other creature under heaven. Because of the economic dependence of the human female on her mate, she is modified to sex to an excessive degree. . . . It is not the normal sex-tendency, common to all creatures, but an abnormal sex-tendency, produced and maintained by the abnormal economic relation which makes one sex get its living from the other by the exercise of sex-functions. (Pp. 38-39)

Women's economic dependence on men and its effect on the "sex-relation" were not for Gilman completely "social" in-

stances of subjection. Rather, they represented the development of a particular social relation through human evolution. Even Gilman's use of the term "economy" refers constantly to "nature":

Economic independence is a relative condition at best. In the broadest sense, all living things are economically dependent upon others,—the animals upon the vegetables, and man upon both. In a narrower sense, all social life is economically interdependent, man producing collectively what he could by no possibility produce separately. (*Women and Economics*, pp. 10-11)

Here we can see how the idea of "economy" was, for Gilman, inclusive rather than exclusive: "economy" had to do with the getting of food and shelter, regardless of species. A term that we generally think of as inextricably linked to culture was, for Gilman, about the "natural" world as well.

Gilman's story about how the "abnormal" economic relation between women and men came about also demonstrates the conceptual dependence of her work upon the gynocentric account of Lester Frank Ward and its positivistic view of evolutionary change. She wrote:

Primitive man and his female were animals, like other animals. . . . [S]he was as nimble and ferocious as he, save for the added belligerence of the males in their sex-competition. In this competition, he, like the other male creatures, fought savagely with his hairy rivals; and she, like other female creatures, complacently viewed their struggles, and mated with the victor. (*Women and Economics*, p. 60)

In the primitive condition, in other words, women were like other female animals—they chose their mates. Gilman continued: "There seems to have come a time when it occurred to the dawning intelligence of this amiable savage that it was cheaper and easier to fight a little female, and have it done with, than to fight a big male every time. So he instituted the custom of enslaving the female . . ." (p. 60). Evolutionary shift, in this paradigm, occurred with a conscious choice on the part of male humans. Because Gilman saw the past in this manner, she had hope for the future insofar as people could again make a decision with evolutionary progress in mind. Thus, it is not in "society" that Gilman saw a solution to problems produced by "society" (this is a claim made by Cynthia Eagle Russett in *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood*) but in an evolutionary decision made in the best interests of the human race.<sup>18</sup> She wrote both *Women and Economics* and *Her-*

*land* in order to convince her readers that humans could be agents in the process of *natural* selection.

The culture of Herland improves with each generation, both "naturally" and by the direct influence of society. Herlanders change their religions and laws as their society and culture change (p. 113). Their active and independent life has caused their general physique to become stronger and, in the eyes of the male protagonists, more "boylike." Indeed, the variety of Herlander physiology startles the men, because parthenogenetic birth should signify a narrowing of inherited traits:

[W]hen we asked them . . . how they accounted for so much divergence without cross-fertilization, they attributed it partly to the careful education, which followed each slight tendency to differ, and partly to the law of mutation. This they had found in their work with plants, and fully proven in their own case. (P. 77)

The "law of mutation" is a reference to Mendelian genetics, which were rediscovered at the turn of the century and which dealt the decisive blow to Lamarckian ideas concerning the heritability of acquired characteristics. However, Gilman was ambivalent about the decline of Lamarckian thinking.

At one point, one of the Herlander teachers comments: "We have always thought it a grave initial misfortune to have lost half our little world. Perhaps that is one reason why we have so striven for conscious improvement." To this Terry replies that "acquired traits are not transmissible . . . Weissman [*sic*] has proved that." This is a reference to the work of August Weismann, who in the 1890s maintained that the genetic material in the "germ cells" solely determined the traits transmitted from parent to offspring and that this material was not altered by education or environment. Weismann's work was later verified by the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics. The teacher continues:

If that is so [if acquired traits cannot be transmitted through genetic material], then our improvement must be due either to mutation, or solely to education, . . . We certainly have improved. It may be that all these higher qualities were latent in the original mother [the original woman able to give birth parthenogenetically, from whom all Herlanders are descended], that careful education is bringing them out, and that our personal differences depend upon slight variations in the prenatal condition. (P. 78)

These useful "variations," however, occur only within a single (white) race. Van is quite clear: "[T]here 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" (p. 54). In her sequel to *Herland*, *With Her in Ourland*, where racial issues are explored much more explicitly through Ellador's observations of American society, Gilman develops her theories about the necessity to separate races according to their relative historical development.<sup>19</sup> In *Herland*, eugenicist ideology surfaces in relation to maternal fitness rather than racial difference, although the suggestion of an Aryan race reminds the reader of the linkage of eugenics to ideas concerning race purity.<sup>20</sup>

Gilman links eugenicist ideas with a Lamarckian explanation for the improvements in their culture and people. The argument Zava, the teacher, makes concerning mutation is problematic for Gilman, because mutation is a random factor in evolutionary genetics. Gilman consistently argued for planned progress and improvement, and mutation theory did not provide the kind of teleological map of development that she wanted to assert was possible and preferable for human society. This is one reason why Lamarckian thought experienced a resurgence in American intellectual circles: the idea that acquired characteristics could be inherited by a future generation made evolution into an optimizing process. Zava's final suggestion, based on the idea that some "latent" quality of the original mother had been brought out by the "careful education" provided by Herland society, is a neo-Lamarckian argument: culture itself is the force for biosocial hereditary change. As Carl Degler describes it, neo-Lamarckianism postulated that "will and purpose [are] the agencies bringing about evolutionary change," and this idea was more acceptable to many than the randomness of evolutionary change suggested by Darwin's theory of evolution based on natural selection.<sup>21</sup>

In *Herland*, Lamarckian practices of education for cultural improvement are bolstered by a form of eugenic birth control. In a discussion with his teacher, Somel, Van learns that the Herlander women have "made it our first business to train out, to breed out, when possible, the lowest types." When he asks how this is possible with asexual reproduction, she replies that any woman with "bad qualities" would be asked not to give

birth, to "renounce motherhood" for the good of the society. If this failed, they would be prevented from rearing the children they birthed. Although Van becomes visibly upset by this, Somel relates calmly the Herlander philosophy that childrearing is as specialized a skill as dentistry and that the women (except for a few, whose attitude in this regard demonstrates their unfitness for motherhood) gladly allow those skilled in childcare to care for the children most of the time (pp. 82-83).

Again, Lamarckian ideas bolster Gilman's eugenicism. Women with "bad qualities" are asked to renounce motherhood, presumably so that these qualities are not passed on; however, even if a child is born to such a woman, by taking the task of rearing out of the mother's hands, the society believes that it will be able to curtail the expression of these qualities in the child and thus the transmission of these qualities to later generations.

Women's interest in this process is defined by their special relation to "the race." Gynocentric evolutionism suggested that women were the "race type"—"her natural impulses were more in accordance with the laws of growth than were those of the male"; "woman was the natural, patient, tireless worker, the mother. Males were essentially individualistic and competitive."<sup>22</sup> Gilman understood this distinction between women and men of the dominant race according to the prevalent idea of "male variability and female conservatism"—"She was the deep, steady, mainstream of life, and he the active variant, helping to widen and change that life, but rather as an adjunct than as an essential" (*Women and Economics*, p. 130).<sup>23</sup> Implicit in Gilman's argument is the idea that women are superior to men, at least with regard to the human race as a whole. As Mariana Valverde points out, however, for evolutionary feminists like Gilman and Elizabeth Blackwell, "the paradigm of the human 'race' was the Anglo-Saxon Protestant ruling bloc."<sup>24</sup>

The men who come to Herland believe that the "sex-distinction" common in white Victorian society is universal. They believe in the very "feminine nature" that Gilman found so destructive, and they believe that they can make the women express their latent "feminine nature." 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.

For the three men, to have the women become more feminine would mean to conform to a certain standard of behavior prescribed for white women in the Western world. Van, Jeff, and Terry think of it as an absolute standard of behavior, but Gilman's narrative proves it to be a proscriptive behavior forcing women to accommodate themselves to men's needs in order to obtain food and housing. In their hearts, the men want to believe that the Herland "girls" are marrying them for the form of "sex-love" that the men are used to, but to the women of Herland, love means something different: it is comradely, warm, motherly in fact. Van writes that his wife refused to give in and have sex "in season and out of season" as he would like. She responds,

If I thought it was really right and necessary, I could perhaps bring myself to it, for your sake, dear; but I do not want it—not at all. You would not have a mere submission, would you? That is not the kind of high romantic love you spoke of, surely? It is a pity, of course, that you should have to adjust your highly specialized faculties to our unspecialized ones. (P. 129)<sup>25</sup>

The women of Herland, indeed, are unspecialized for sex—they have no training in the "sex-tradition" (what is "manly" or "womanly" [p. 92]), do not understand the "sex-motive" (which the men think makes for bad dramatic productions [p. 99]), and, simply, do not understand "sex" (p. 134).

The word "sex" never appears in *Herland* as a signifier for sexual intercourse, which is always alluded to in cautiously circumspect terms. "Sex" refers most often to the idea of sexual difference, with the added complexity that it also suggests that one of the sexes is, in fact, "the sex." In an evolutionary paradigm, women are usually perceived to be "the sex," because women are, in Gilman's terms, "modified to sex" to a greater degree than men: women's lives are circumscribed by the fact of their sex, as the sexual division of labor defines women as a class based on their sex and its perceived functions. Yet men are also, at times, considered "the sex," because sexual rela-

tions are said to be always on their minds. Who gets to represent "sex" is indeed a very political matter.

The problem that the men have in relation to their wives, indeed to all the women of Herland, is that they cannot force the women to be "the sex" so that they may have sexual relations when they please. This suggests one way to read Terry's claim when he is expelled from Herland—"They don't know the first thing about Sex"—as well as Van's interpretation that "he meant the male sex, naturally" (p. 134). Van's "naturally" attempts to attach one meaning to this outburst, an outburst that comes from Terry's wounded pride and, we might surmise, his frustrated sexual desire. If we interpret Terry's claim in relation to the recent incidents of the narrative, he is arguing that the Herlanders don't know anything about sexual relations, which *Van* interprets as having to do with the needs, values, and beliefs of men. This demonstrates the extent to which Van has become acculturated to the Herland norm, where "the word *woman* called up all that big background [the world of activity], so far as they had gone in social development; and the word *man* meant to them only *male*—the sex" (p. 137). Terry, throughout the entire text, has been interested in "only one thing" and that has been a problem in a country where that "thing" is inconceivable in the eyes of women—and the women are strong enough to repudiate both his claims and his advances.

Women (and men) in Herland can achieve a kind of personhood unavailable to either in the traditional "bi-sexual" world where excessive "sex-distinction" has robbed both members of the species of their humanity. The Herlanders are interested in reintroducing sexual reproduction, because variation and greater complexity represent to them (as to Gilman) progressive development—at least within "Aryanness." Thus, in its reverence for variation within the white race, Herland is as Spencerian as they come. Unlike Spencer, however, the Herlanders demonstrate that excessive sex-distinction is unnecessary for human evolution. Indeed, their country proves that excessive sex-distinction is one significant hindrance to the further development of human civilization.

Yet, it is important to underscore here that variation and complexity within *whiteness* are what is being promoted, not variation and complexity that include racial mixing. In Her-

land, sexual reproduction will increase the pool of inheritable characteristics; but, in keeping with the views of most evolutionary feminists, this will only result in "progress" if degenerate or atavistic "types" are excluded. In the eyes of First Wave feminists, all people of color, as well as Eastern and Southern European whites, were included in that latter category.<sup>26</sup>

Reading Gilman's *Herland* in the context of her gynocentric evolutionism helps us to understand how the absence of sexual difference creates a society in which there is no sexual desire as such. In the Darwinian world of sexual reproduction, "sex" suggests genital heterosexuality. In keeping with this tradition, Gilman believed that sexual relations apart from procreative purposes were indicative of the "excessive sex-distinction" in modern Western civilization.<sup>27</sup> Thus, while she understood "sex" to be the vehicle for oppression precisely because of the way it was connected to an unequal economic relation, Gilman was not able to see institutionalized heterosexuality as a force that kept women dependent on men. In this context, her evolutionism helped her to produce a politics narrowly focused on "sex-distinctions" that are heterosexist and racist in their initial conception. Within this paradigm, where "sex" signifies difference within procreative sexuality, homosexuality could only be represented as part of the "morbid institution" of "excessive sex-distinction" that Gilman so vehemently rejected, because it represented sexual activity for its own sake.<sup>28</sup>

Gilman's racism, like her homophobia, was part of her evolutionary perspective. Her understanding of race involved the idea of differential development, and she opposed mixing racial groups that she perceived to be at different stages of development: in her view, this was the tragedy of the United States. In the sequel to *Herland*, *With Her in Ourland*, Ellador argues that slavery was the biggest mistake in American history—"The patient's worst disease was that disgraceful out-of-date attack of slavery, only escaped by a surgical operation, painful, costly, and not by any means wholly successful"—not only because she believes racism to be disgraceful ("I think your prejudice against the black is silly, wicked, and—hypocritical") but also because it brought a mass of people unready for democracy into a democratic state.<sup>29</sup>

In some ways, Gilman's "remedy" for the untoward mixing

of races and ethnic groups at different stages of development matches the model of Herland. Groups at unequal stages of development must be separated so that the backward ones might "catch up." The women of Herland live apart from the rest of the world and therefore develop to (or beyond) its level. In this sense Gilman's revisionary evolutionism addresses racial and sexual differences similarly.

Why, then, does she seem to be antisexist but not antiracist? The answer is that she wrote as a *white* woman, a member of the dominant racial group, although a subordinate member of that group because of her sex. In the corollary analysis of sex, to be a man and to propose the separation of women from society—essentially in order to "grow up"—is to enforce in a paternalistic gesture an already existent set of rules that mandate women's inequality. But to be a *woman* and to propose separatism as a political response to women's oppression in what Gilman would have called the "bi-sexual" world is to highlight women's already marginal social status and to promote women's creative independence apart from men. The women in Herland, after all, develop a society that is an improvement on the male-dominated model of Gilman's time.

A similar power dynamic is at work in Gilman's ideas concerning race. She advocated the separation of races *as a member of the dominant race*, and thus her "prescription" for the ills of American society is not the promotion of racial equality through independence and voluntary separatism. Rather, it is an instance of the dominant group promoting, through paternalism, its own dominance as a model for the "development" of other groups. She not only failed to see that her own whiteness inflected what she seemed to think were parallel remedies for enforced inequality of both women and subordinated races, but she also never offered the critique of imperialism that her analysis in *With Her in Ourland* so obviously suggests. She did not argue, except in her critique of slavery, that the "more developed races" actively oppressed other groups. Concerned with making sure that those admitted to the United States were "ready" for the demands of democracy, she advocated assimilation to an implicitly racialized norm of citizenship. Indeed, Gilman's ideas about the unfitness of subordinate ethnic and racial groups for democratic society presage current reac-

tionary concerns about genetic differences between racial groups.<sup>30</sup>

What Gilman does show us is how social organizations depend upon expectations about biology and its purchase on human behavior. In Herland, the social organization of the sexes, what we would now call the "sex/gender system," depends upon, is indeed founded upon, the social organization of reproduction. And, before the men arrive, reproduction in Herland happens without "sex." Without "sex," Herland's inhabitants lose sexual specificity, "sex-distinction"; they become "people." When the men meet the people of Herland, *they*, not the people, become "sexed." The people, the women, remain unsexed, precisely because the economy of their country, as well as the economy of their personhood, can get along fine without "sex."

Social relations, in Gilman's feminist revision of evolutionary theory, cannot be separated from sexual embodiment. Indeed, social relations proceed from sexual embodiment—but in Gilman's view, sexual embodiment does not concern desire but the ordered progression of life through generations. Sexual embodiment, in other words, represents for Gilman the reproductive portion of the life of every individual, but it does not define the individual in her or his totality. When it does—when either women or men become "the sex"—those subjects feel constrained by their definition as "sex" itself.

It is a testament to our own immersion in a culture that emphasizes (ad nauseum) individual desire that we cannot see such a vision as anything other than loss—a loss of desire (that would signify for us a loss of self), a loss of the passion that makes life worthwhile and interesting. But in this interpretation we are already siding with the men who infiltrate Herland, insofar as they find Herlander dramas boring and the meaning of marriage diminished when it does not include romantic "sex-love." "Desire" as we understand it—as an aspect of personhood that is constitutive and universal—is understood by Gilman to be a concept fabricated and perpetuated by men to maintain the "excessive sex-distinction" that subordinates women to men.

The Herland world takes biological reproduction into account in its organization of social duties, work, and domestic-

ty. In this aspect, Gilman was very much like other First Wave feminists, for whom "the conceptualization of women's work in reproduction was key to feminism as a whole."<sup>31</sup> Although this translates into a rather extreme maternalism and pronatalism—"mothering" becomes the paradigmatic, *and sole*, social relationship that defines Herlander culture—surely we can see that issues of reproduction and childcare in contemporary Western societies are distinctively *not* taken into account in those very realms. Indeed, like many feminists today, Gilman saw that women's liberation from what we would now consider "gender expectations" was inextricably linked to their role in biological reproduction: how much control they exerted in sexual matters, how society organized childcare, how the social world accommodated maternity and its practices. At the core of her analysis is the female body as a product of both biological and social evolution. This is why parthenogenesis is crucial to the scheme of *Herland*, even if it is its most fantastical element.

Parthenogenesis is a metaphor for women's control of reproduction. That it is a biological process demonstrates Gilman's desire to make the biological body central to the social arrangements of which it is a part—instead of treating it as a substance to be altered so as to accommodate societal norms, which was the way she interpreted her culture's expectations of white women. Contemporary feminists should take from Gilman this perception of the biological female body as central to women's experience yet remain aware that there are no "colorless" bodies and that without an analysis of racialization, "the female body" will be constructed as white.<sup>32</sup>

Certainly, Gilman's perspective on nature/culture seems odd from the vantage point of feminist theory in the 1990s. In our analytic context, distinguishing between categories like "nature" and "society" seems all-important in determining priorities for political struggle and conceptual redefinition. Yet the feminist resurgence in analyzing and theorizing the body—evident in the recent publication of Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*; Moira Gatens's *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*; Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*; Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*; and Anne Balsamo's *Technologies of the Gendered*



*Body: Reading Cyborg Women*, among other texts<sup>33</sup>—suggests that problems attendant to the materiality of sex (as opposed to its metaphysics or its psychology) persist. This is what I was trying to suggest about current public policies concerning reproduction and infant nurture. What all of these recent books suggest is that the sex/gender distinction, as it was developed in the 1970s and 1980s, cannot adequately account for residual difficulties in theorizing about sexual difference as *both* corporeal and socially inflected.

I offer this reading of Gilman not as an answer to the current theoretical situation but as a look back at an alternate conceptualization of the materiality of sex. Rereading *Herland* and its evolutionary paradigm of utopia, from the perspective of a theoretical world in which "gender" as we currently conceive it did not exist as an analytical category, can at least suggest that integrating a vision of social change with a recognition of, respect for, and, most significantly, a redefinition of "biological experience" is not a new problem in feminist thought.

## NOTES

I would like to thank the readers for *Feminist Studies* for their helpful suggestions for revision. As always, Nancy Cervetti was a sounding board for my ideas and offered me significant critical feedback. My thanks to all those who helped me to refine the essay; responsibility for its flaws resides with me alone.

1. Anne Edwards, "The Sex/Gender Distinction: Has It Outlived Its Usefulness?" *Australian Feminist Studies* 10 (summer 1989): 7, 9.
2. "Gender" was introduced as a term to signify social aspects of sex identity (as opposed to the biological aspects designated by "sex") in the context of treatment protocols for intersexual patients in the 1950s. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, feminists exploited this distinction between "sex" and "gender" to produce a profound commentary on the social construction of sex inequality. See Bernice L. Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 72-109, for a discussion of the introduction and elaboration of "gender" within medicine in the 1950s and 1960s.
3. Marie Tedesco, "A Feminist Challenge to Darwinism: Antoinette L.B. Blackwell on the Relations of the Sexes in Nature and Society," in *Feminist Visions: Toward a Transformation of the Liberal Arts Curriculum*, ed. Diane L. Fowlkes and Charlotte S. McClure (University: University of Alabama Press, 1984), 53.
4. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, *The Sexes throughout Nature* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1875; rpt., Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1976), 113-14.
5. See Elizabeth Blackwell, *Essays in Medical Sociology*, vols. 1 and 2, *Medicine and Society in America*, ed. Charles E. Rosenberg (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1972). See also Kate Krug, "Women Ovulate, Men Spermate:

Elizabeth Blackwell as a Feminist Physiologist," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7 (July 1996): 51-72. For a discussion of other evolutionary feminists, including Elizabeth Blackwell, see Mariana Valverde, "When the Mother of the Race Is Free: Race, Reproduction, and Sexuality in First-Wave Feminism," in *Gender Conflicts*, ed. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 3-26.

6. See Carol Stabile, *Feminism and the Technological Fix* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1994), 27-36.

7. Krug's work on Elizabeth Blackwell provides an interesting comparison to Gilman, although Krug herself does not mention the latter; Valverde's essay on First Wave feminism does mention Gilman but only in passing.

8. Carol Farley Kessler, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress toward Utopia with Selected Writings* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 78.

9. As another example of what I would call the current misreading of Gilman, Frances Bartkowski writes: "In *Women and Economics* Gilman uses analogies to the animal world to describe male and female characteristics. . . . While Gilman does a great deal to prove that such concepts of sex distinctions are socially transmitted, she also accepts certain distinctions as biologically and psychically immutable." The problem here is more subtle than that presented by Kessler. Bartkowski does not explicitly use the terminology of sex/gender distinction to articulate her point, but the sex/gender paradigm is nevertheless the lens through which she interprets Gilman's ideas. See Frances Bartkowski, *Feminist Utopias* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 27.

10. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, ed. Carl Degler (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 101-2. All other references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text.

11. Lois Magner claims:

The ancient analogy of the "social organism" was used both by Spencer and Gilman, but their views of its composition and proper mode of behavior could hardly be more dissimilar. Within Spencer's system the individual units of the social organism owed nothing to each other or to the whole. Gilman saw the social organism as the form of life within which, and only within which, human beings could be fully human.

Magner notes that Gilman "even claimed that the social organism did not exist merely as a useful analogy or illustration, *but as a literal biological fact*" (emphasis added). See Lois Magner, "Darwin and the Woman Question," in *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, ed. Joanne Karpinski (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992), 121-22.

12. There are extraordinarily few treatments of Gilman's evolutionism in the critical literature. There are two essays by Lois Magner, both of which are largely descriptive. See Lois Magner, "Women and the Scientific Idiom: Textual Episodes from Wollstonecraft, Fuller, Gilman, and Firestone," *Signs* 4 (autumn 1978): 61-80, and her "Darwinism and the Woman Question," 115-28. Ann J. Lane provides an extended discussion of *Women and Economics* in *To "Herland" and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: Pantheon, 1990). For a reader seeking an introduction to Gilman's ideas, Lane's synopsis is an excellent source. However, because Lane attempts to present to the contemporary reader the reasons why Gilman's ideas are valuable for current feminist analysis, she tends to make them understandable within the contemporary gender paradigm of feminist theory. The most comprehensive discussion of Gilman's relation to evolutionary theory and social Darwinism appears in Maureen L. Egan, "Evolutionary Theory in the Social Philosophy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman," *Hypatia* 4 (spring 1989): 102-19. Egan treats a wide range of Gilman's work, placing it in the intellectual contexts of phi-

losophy, sociology, and evolutionary theory. Egan's work thus provides a fundamentally useful source for any scholar interested in Gilman's evolutionism; however, she does not consider Gilman's fiction.

13. See Ludmilla Jordanova, *Lamarck* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

14. See Valverde.

15. See Susan Merrill Squier, *Babies in Bottles: Twentieth-Century Visions of Reproductive Technology* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 56-62, for a discussion of liberal eugenicist views. See also Bert Bender, *The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871-1926* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), esp. 1-30, for a discussion of the impact of Darwinism on American intellectual circles. See also Egan.

16. Ann J. Lane, Introduction to *Herland*, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (New York: Pantheon, 1979), ix-x. Subsequent references to the novel will be provided parenthetically in the text.

17. Whether Gilman actually *identifies* with Van, her sociologist narrator, is more difficult to determine. The text of *Herland* provides her with ample opportunity to demonstrate his shortcomings; however, he is a more likable character than Jeff (who succumbs to Herland too easily) or Terry (who must be expelled). Van as a "sociologist" represents the class of right-thinking but misguided male sociologists that Gilman hopes to convince of her views. That he is such a sympathetic character suggests some form of identification on the part of the author.

18. Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 151-54.

19. See especially Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *With Her in Ourland, The Forerunner* 7 (June 1916): 152-57; this text is now available as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *With Her in Ourland: Sequel to "Herland,"* ed. Mary Jo Deegan and Michael R. Hill (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1997).

20. For critiques of Gilman's racism and a commentary on feminist complicity with Gilman's beliefs, see Stabile, 33-35; Bartkowski, 41; and Susan Lanser, "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America," *Feminist Studies* 15 (fall 1989): 415-41.

21. Carl Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 23. See also Bender. Degler also suggests that one effect of the demise of Lamarckian ideas in reformist thinking was the rise of eugenics: "[T]he abandonment of the belief in acquired characters was a stimulus for the eugenics movement" (24).

22. Magner, "Darwinism and the Woman Question," 123.

23. The concept of male variability and female conservatism was based on the idea that men differed widely and women tended toward a mean. For example, men exhibited both more genius and more imbecility and women were more prone toward average mental ability. Variability was linked to "katabolic" or destructive energy, while conservatism was linked to both construction and stasis (Russett, 89-103). Thus, Gilman wrote:

Since the female had not the tendency to vary which distinguished the male, it was essential that the expansive forces of masculine energy be combined with the preservative and constructive forces of feminine energy. The expansive and variable male energy, struggling under its new necessity for constructive labor, has caused that labor to vary and progress more than it would have done in feminine hands alone. (*Women and Economics*, 132)

24. Valverde, 5.

25. Elizabeth Blackwell's views are distinctly different from Gilman's with regard to this issue. Blackwell argued that sex in humans was different from sex among "the brutes," because humans have a "sentiment of mental sex." The force of Gilman's argument is to *liken* human sex to animal sex, in order to propose that the

former has become unnatural. See Elizabeth Blackwell, *Essays in Medical Sociology*, esp. vol. 1, chap. 1, "The Distinctive Character of Human Sex."

26. See Krug, 63-64, for a discussion of Elizabeth Blackwell's views of the degenerative effects of racial mixing.

27. For a discussion of Gilman's possible homosexuality, see Stabile, 34-36. For a discussion of Gilman in the context of a more sexually adventurous First Wave of feminism, see Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 38-42; and Lane, *To "Herland" and Beyond*, 333.

K. Graehme Hall argues that Gilman's relationship with Martha Luther was purely platonic, because for Gilman "sexuality and love are distinct" (167), thus suggesting that the lack of sexuality in *Herland* has to do with Gilman's utterly conventional heterosexuality. See K. Graehme Hall, "Mothers and Children: 'Rising with the Resistless Tide' in *Herland*," in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Woman and Her Work*, ed. Sheryl L. Meyering (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 161-72.

28. In *Patriarchal Precedents*, Rosalind Coward writes that "discussions of sexual relations," held in the context of nineteenth-century investigations of the evolution of the historical relations between the sexes, maintained "absolutely fixed ideas about sex and sexual identity. Sex was heterosexual, reproductive activity and even those theories which argued for primitive promiscuity at the beginnings of human society, never questioned the different sexual entities of women and men." See Rosalind Coward, *Patriarchal Precedents: Sexuality and Social Relations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 254. For a resistant reading of evolutionary theory's heterosexism, see Martha McCaughey, "Perverting Evolutionary Narratives of Heterosexual Masculinity," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, no. 2-3 (1996): 261-87.

29. Gilman, *With Her in Ourland*, 156, 155.

30. In her analysis of Gilman's racial views, Carol Farley Kessler states: "However acute Gilman's thinking was on women's issues, her views on race contrast strikingly and reveal ethnocentrism. On this issue, she was unable to think beyond her era," and she concurs that "Gilman's social Darwinist views blinded her to her own racism." See Kessler, 47-48. Maureen Egan writes: "In the implicit racism which pervades her cultural comparisons and her assessment of what she, along with her contemporaries, calls 'savage' periods and peoples, she echoes the prejudices of her culture and class. On the other hand, there is much in her social philosophy which is valid today." See Egan, 113.

31. Valverde, 4.

32. This issue becomes especially interesting given that "race" is currently sloughing off its status as a biological category. In examining "sex" as a category that involves thinking about "race," we might see that each term has a unique (although entangled) historical relation to biological theories and maps of the body.

33. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 1996); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); and Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996).